

ISSUES OF PASTORAL CARE AMONG THE
VIETNAMESE AMERASIANS IN SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA
FROM AN ASIAN THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

A Professional Project
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the Faculty of the
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In Partial Fulfillment
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Doctor of Ministry

by
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ABSTRACT

Issues of Pastoral Care Among the Vietnamese Amerasians in San Diego, California from an Asian Theological Perspective

by

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Chapter 1 identifies major problems faced by Amerasians such as loss of identity, poverty, exploitation, discrimination, rejection and abuse. This project seeks to find some concrete ways to help heal the pains and suffering of Amerasians and to provide concrete tools so that they can make adjustments and thrive in their new adventures in America.

In Chapter 2, a brief history of the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War is presented as a background for better understanding of the sources of the problems. Then, these problems are examined in more detail which sets up the basis for searching concrete solutions to the problems.

In Chapter 3, five different stories of Amerasians describe their struggles with the loss of identity in the Vietnamese culture which emphasizes the importance of one's biological father. Then the poverty, the discriminations and the suffering they faced are presented.

Chapter 4 analyzes many aspects of the Amerasians' emotional needs. Both negative and positive attitudes regarding the Amerasians are presented. Pastoral care is

considered as a resource for healing damaged emotions. Moreover, this chapter emphasizes the role of the Amerasians in the healing process with the help of God, supportive churches, and other community groups.

In Chapter 5, some theological bases for understanding Amerasians are explored. Then, various ways which facilitate dialogue among the Amerasians, the Vietnamese and the American communities are touched upon. The chapter emphasizes the role of dialogue in the process of healing.

Chapter 6 presents various ministries carried out by the Vietnamese ministry teams at Wesley United Methodist Church in San Diego to meet the needs of Amerasians.

In Chapter 7, means of establishing ministries of hope with Amerasians in local churches are suggested. In conclusion, this thesis encourages local churches and communities to respond urgently to the needs of Amerasians in as many practical ways as they are able.

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May God enable you and all those who care about the Amerasians to use this as a tool and a guide to start a ministry to Amerasians, to bridge the gaps, to heal the pains and to empower the Amerasians to live fruitful, effective and abundant lives.

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Dedication

to
Mom and Dad,
for bringing me up in the Christian faith,
for your prayers and sacrificial love,

and

to
my wife,
for patiently loving me the way I am,
for sharing Godly wisdom and helping me through.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Problem Addressed by the Project

This project deals with the lack of understanding in the Vietnamese communities which causes prejudices that lead to the mistreatment, pain and suffering of the Amerasians. Specifically, this project addresses the issue of the lack of care and concern for the Amerasians and the absence of a prophetic voice from the Vietnamese communities to address adequately the problems faced by the Amerasians. By study of the Amerasians' experiences through personal interviews and library research of written materials about them, this project offers increased understanding of the Amerasians' struggles and provides a foundation for better treatment and healing for the Amerasians. The author presents various programs from the Vietnamese Congregation at Wesley United Methodist Church, which provides a model of pastoral care and practical ministries to and with Amerasians in the multicultural society of San Diego, California.

Importance of the Problem

The Amerasians are regarded neither as fully Vietnamese nor fully American. Seth Mydans calls them "half-American, half-Vietnamese."¹ They are the results of a mixed race or half-breed of Vietnamese-American relationships during the

¹ Seth Mydans, "Once Lost in Vietnam, Now Lost in America," New York Times, 7 July 1995, A12.

Vietnam War from 1961 to 1975. There are about 30,000 Amerasians who are the casualties of "America's national ambivalence about Vietnam."² Due to the hatred of those who were involved in the war, the Communists of the North and the republics of the South, and the failure of the United States' military, the Amerasians have been abandoned by the fathers of the most powerful country in the world, and are unwanted by their family members and by the society at large. They are called the "pariahs" of society.³ Nancy Cooper and Ron Moreau state what Vietnamese officials sometimes told the Amerasians: "Get out of here and go back to your country."⁴

While living in Vietnam, they suffered all kinds of discrimination, rejection, and abuse. No one can really understand all the loss, poverty, discrimination and suffering they experienced. David Gonzalez describes all the above feelings as "tangled emotions." He says:

Black or white, their lives were forged through discrimination and hardship in Vietnam where they were derided as "the dust of life."⁵

² Dianne Klein, "Lingering Casualties of Vietnam," Los Angeles Times, 30 June 1991, A1.

³ Philip Gourevitch, "...But It Does Not Forgive," New York Times, 29 Apr. 1995, L23.

⁴ Nancy Cooper and Ron Moreau, "'Go Back to Your Country.' Amerasians Head for Their Fathers' Homeland," Newsweek, 14 Mar. 1988, 34.

⁵ David Gonzalez, "For Afro-Amerasians, Tangled Emotions." New York Times, 16 Nov. 1992, B1.

After the Communists seized complete control of the South, they wanted to get rid of the Amerasians who reminded them of the terrible war. But the Communists did not know how. They could not send the Amerasians back to their fathers because the United States was not ready to deal with and accept the consequences of its own failure after the war.

Therefore, the Communists tried to brainwash the Amerasians by teaching them to hate their fathers. The Communists seized the Amerasians' houses and at the same time punished the political prisoners by sending them to re-education camps. They also sent families that had any relationship with the previous regime to the rural areas called the New Economic Zones.⁶ Many of these Amerasian families could not endure the harsh weather, and the rocky ground did not produce enough food for them. Without money, fresh water, schools, social services, hospitals, tools or equipment to cut the trees or to plow the fields, many were forced to return to the city to eke out a daily living and to start life again.

But, wherever they were, the Amerasians were mocked and called names by the Vietnamese children and adults. Thanh Le, a black Amerasian, recalls that people often said something like, "You are the 'con lai' Go back to your

⁶ Marilyn Lacey, In Our Fathers' Land: Vietnamese Amerasians in the United States (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1985), 10-11.

father."⁷ Amerasians were refused medical treatment by people of the local hospitals. A mother described the prejudice coming from a local hospital that refused to treat her Amerasian daughter. The people at the hospital told the mother, "Because your daughter is an Amerasian, let the Americans cure her!"⁸ According to Na Nguyen, a counselor who works closely with the Amerasians, "The white Amerasians seemed to suffer less verbal and physical abuse than the black Amerasians."⁹ In Vietnam, the Amerasians are rejected by a society that does not uphold a mixed race of Western and Asian. It has fought for thousands of years against the Chinese to maintain the Vietnamese identity and a pure race.

Many Amerasians were shocked when they heard stories told from their grandparents that they had been abandoned by their fathers or mothers when they were still very little. Many Amerasians do not really know the faces of their fathers. However, some lucky ones did have photographs of their fathers. Unfortunately, most of them do not even know their fathers' names. In the case of Thu-Ha Le, she only knows that the first name of her father is John.¹⁰ Therefore, many Amerasians grew up during their formative years lacking a strong foundation for building the identity

⁷ Thanh Le's story is told in Chapter 3.

⁸ Lacey, 10.

⁹ Na Nguyen, interview with author, 16 Jan. 1993.

¹⁰ Klein, A1.

that a father could give. Sadly, society has cast them out by not recognizing them as people who have rights like other Vietnamese because they have Amerasian identities.

When they were children, they were denied the right to attend public schools. For many, it was because after many times of being uprooted, they did not have a street address. Without showing their names on the local neighborhood family register, many could not enter school. Therefore, they could not receive a decent education. They lack the basic education entitled to all people. Patrick Mott says that many Amerasians arrived in the United States lacking "a facility in English, a place to live and a marketable skill."¹¹ As a result of society's denial, many of these children grew up as adults lacking the knowledge and skills to read and write. They are often called "the illiterate." Dianne Klein, a writer for the Los Angeles Times, says:

Most of the Amerasians have had little formal education in Vietnam. Illiteracy, in Vietnamese and English, is rife. Many cannot do simple math.¹²

Many Amerasians dropped out of school at an early age due to harassment, discrimination and cruelty they received at school. My Lien, a female Amerasian who is doing better than her peers in Vietnam, said, "If I have an education in

¹¹ Patrick Mott, "A Long and Winding Road to America," Los Angeles Times, 3 Apr. 1992, E9.

¹² Klein, A12.

America I will be more respected."¹³

The Amerasians are unwelcome at social gatherings and playgrounds. People look down on them and sneer at them because they look different. They are not welcome among the people of higher social and economical levels. To some Vietnamese, this group of people is regarded as an inferior race. Sometimes, they are called "nhung dua tre bui doi" or "children of the dust." Their mothers are considered the "black sheep" who have brought shame, loss of name and reputation to the family. The Amerasians, therefore, grew up being ridiculed and rejected by their families.

As teenagers in Vietnam, they lived under a hostile environment. Some came to believe that they were not worthy of love. Some of them became homeless and lived day by day on the pavements on the streets and took low paying jobs to earn some money.¹⁴ They polished shoes, peddled matches, sold peanuts, crackers, fruit, and ice cream.¹⁵ Some picked up plastic bags at trash dumps, washed these bags at a river's bank, then sold them to the recycling center. Some stole things and sold them at pawn shops. Some became beggars. To make quick money, some sold themselves to Communist officers, tourists, or to anyone who had money.

¹³ Cooper and Moreau, 35.

¹⁴ Mydans, "Once Lost in Vietnam," A12.

¹⁵ Susanna McBee, "The Amerasians: Tragic Legacy of Our Far East Wars," U.S. News and World Report, 7 May 1984, 49.

They did anything to survive. It seemed there was no other way out of the pit. Life offered no hope to them. Their state of mind was, "I have to survive today; tomorrow might never come." Many compared their lives to the life of a dog, which means you are at the bottom of the pit. That is the lowest level you could get in society.

Others lived with their friends in small groups. Usually the strongest or smartest would be the leader of the group. Whatever the leader told them to do they had to do to survive. Mary P. Nguyen, a social worker at St. Anselm Amerasian Center in Garden Grove, California, describes some of the Amerasians' characteristics as "often impolite, demanding and brash, quick to anger and quick to give up."¹⁶

Sadly, the religious communities have not done much to help resolve the problem. The Protestant community in Vietnam for many years was silent about addressing the issue of justice for these Amerasians. The Church had no power to speak up against the Communist government, for fear of persecution. But even in the United States where human rights are propagated, it seems that not many were concerned enough to speak out for the Amerasians, except some churches which participated in the Amerasians Refugee Assistance Program with World Vision.

Growing up in a war-torn country and living in the war zone of DucMy, NhaTrang Province, I had seen so much

¹⁶ Klein, A12.

suffering when soldiers and civilians had their limbs cut off during enemy raids. I saw people killed by exploding grenades and cannons. I felt pity for the victims and their families. These experiences helped me relate to suffering people better. Amerasians are a special group of people who have touched my heart with their life stories. I want to do something to help ease their pain and suffering. I want to offer them God's grace, love and hope.

The bottom line is this: "The Amerasians have not done anything wrong to deserve the harsh mistreatment."¹⁷ By being born Amerasians, having white or black skin, they have suffered severe prejudices and many kinds of loss, discrimination, rejection and emotional abuses. The churches of God, and others who are concerned, must reach out and care for the souls and bodies of the Amerasians as they are able.

The Protestant community and the Church in general, can be a crucial advocate to speak for the rights of the Amerasians. Amerasians must be treated as human beings. Everybody is created in the image of God, and therefore everyone should be treated equally, regardless of skin color, racial heritage and class in society.

The Vietnamese churches in San Diego, in other places in this country, and in Vietnam must reach out more, and meet the needs of the Amerasians. The churches of God and

¹⁷ Hai Nam Nguyen, interview with author, 11 Feb. 1993.

the body of Christ must include the Amerasians.

The churches of God should be the reconciling community which affirms that these Amerasians are people of worth and help celebrate with them their unique identity of being Amerasians. The Church should also create a safe environment for open dialogue, looking for practical channels to share the love of God with the Amerasians and to engage them in mutual ministry. This project also suggests some concrete ways to engage local church members and religious/non-religious communities to stop spreading prejudices in regard to Amerasians. It engages all who are concerned about Amerasians to offer genuine care through practical ministries to enable Amerasians to deal with their past hurts and pains and to find the love, grace and strength from God to love, accept and celebrate themselves as people of worth.

Thesis

This project seeks to find some ways to address the problem of prejudices and negative attitudes that lead to the suffering and mistreatment of the Amerasians in Vietnam and the United States. The project seeks to understand the Amerasians better in order to assist them in their new resettlement in America and to develop a dynamic, compassionate pastoral care from an Asian theological perspective that meets their needs, eases their suffering, and enables them to build effective lives in their new

homes.

Definitions of Major Terms

Vietnam

Vietnam is a country that lies adjacent to Cambodia and Laos on the east side and has the Pacific Ocean on the west and south sides. Vietnam shares a border with China at the north side. The land formation has an S-shaped curve, and the distance from the North border to the South end is about 1,000 miles. The narrowest width is about 40 miles. The greatest width is about 300 miles.¹⁸

Vietnamese

The term refers to people who are native Vietnamese.

Viet Minh or Viet Cong

These terms refer to the League for the Independence of Viet Nam. In general, they refer to the Communist party that assumed the leadership of the Vietnamese resistance movement whose members included poor peasants and middle-class nationalists. They were called the infiltrated ones who fought the guerrilla war. Their leader was "Uncle" Ho Chi Minh.

Vietnamese Amerasians

The Amerasians are persons who are neither fully Vietnamese nor fully American. Many look like Americans. In Vietnam, before April 1975, any white person a Vietnamese

¹⁸ Frank N. Trager, Why Viet Nam? (New York: Praeger, 1966), 21.

saw on the street would be either American or French. After April 1975, a white person was thought to be a Russian. A black person was considered one of the above or from Africa. These are the typical perceptions of the Vietnamese people. It is just like an American who thinks that most Asians are Chinese.

Some of these Amerasians have black skin and some have white skin. They all speak Vietnamese, but some of them know a few words of faltering and broken English. Now in their twenties and early thirties, they are no longer children but are young adults. Some of these Amerasians have already married and have children of their own.

Their religious identities are very broad and "ascribe to Confucianism, Taoism, Roman Catholicism and a variety of Eastern religions less well known in the West."¹⁹ Many believe what their families believe and ancestor worship is passed on to them. Some believe that there is a God in Heaven. Some found love from their Christian friends in their villages or in refugee camps and became believers. Most of them are not Christians by claim or practice.

They constitute a special group of people who need to be understood emotionally, psychologically, socially, intellectually and spiritually before any attempt to meet their needs is made.

¹⁹ Paul James Rutledge, The Vietnamese Experience in America (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1992), 47.

"Con Lai" or "My Lai"

The Vietnamese term for the half-breed or mixed race children negatively emphasizes their parental origin. It often refers to the Amerasians who were born of legitimate or illegitimate relationship. Using Kim Yong Bock's Minjung concept, Amerasians or "Con Lai" can be classified as a group of people who "suffer political suppression, economic exploitation, social humiliation, and cultural alienation."²⁰ The Amerasians have been described by Han Wan-Sang as "those who are oppressed politically, exploited economically, alienated sociologically, and kept culturally and intellectually uneducated."²¹

"Tre Bui Doi"

This is the Vietnamese term for "children of the dust."²² It refers to those, Amerasians included, who have

²⁰ Kim Yong Bock, "Korea: A People's Struggle to Be the Subject of History," in Theologia Crucis in Asia: Asian Christian Views on Suffering in the Face of Overwhelming Poverty and Multifaceted Religiosity in Asia, by A. A. Yewangoe, Amsterdam Studies in Theology, vol. 6 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987), 108. Theologia, according to Yewangoe, refers to a scientific, scholarly activity, whereby the problem of suffering is dealt with systematically. Crucis refers to the cross of Christ, a symbol of His suffering and death, and to the current suffering of people in this world in various forms.

²¹ Han Wan-Sang, "Minjung and Society," in Theologia Crucis in Asia: Asian Christian Views on Suffering in the Face of Overwhelming Poverty and Multifaceted Religiosity in Asia, by A. A. Yewangoe, Amsterdam Studies in Theology, vol. 6 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987), 108.

²² Christopher Whipple, "Children of the Dust; A Photographer Seeks Out Hidden Amerasians," Life, Aug. 1985, 98.

run away from home, wandered and lived in the streets "resorting to stealing and prostitution to subsist."²³ They live with their friends in many small groups. There is no place for them to call "home." Sometimes they live in an orphanage or a shelter for children which is sponsored by foreign charity.

Amerasian Homecoming Act

In 1982 Congress passed 97-359, which became the Amerasian Immigration Act under the United Nations' Orderly Departure Program (ODP).²⁴ In September 1984, President Ronald Reagan initiated the humanitarian gesture to bring out more Amerasians. But it had not been accepted by the Vietnamese.²⁵ On the U.S. side, 97-359 turned out to be ineffective. It could not apply to the Amerasians in Vietnam because American-Vietnamese consular relations did not exist. Further, it put a heavy burden on the shoulders of sponsors to provide the Amerasians with full financial responsibility.²⁶ However, with the passage of this Act by Congress in 1987, Amerasians who are classified as immigrants, not as "refugees," are eligible for refugee

²³ "Vietnam's 'Dust Children' Come to America," U.S. News and World Report, 9 May 1983, 13.

²⁴ Lacey, 2.

²⁵ James N. Purcell, Jr. U.S. Refugee Program in Southeast Asia, a bulletin of the Dept. of State, Oct. 1985, 51.

²⁶ Joseph Cerquone, "Refugees in a War That Won't End. Vietnam's American Children," Commonweal, 25 Apr. 1986, 240-41.

benefits. Its philosophy is that "all Amerasians and their family members will be better off in the United States."²⁷

Some Cultural Values

"Vietnam values not only racial purity, but also fatherhood," says Joseph Cerquone.²⁸ A child, son or daughter, must have a father, who will provide an identity for the child. In the Vietnamese tradition, when an elder person meets a child or a young adult, that person often asks, "Who is your father?" Asking the question will help the elder person to identify whose child he/she is talking to. If the father of that child or young adult was a wealthy or well-known person, the elder would treat that child with favor, honor and privilege. If the child's father was a poor peasant, then the child would receive undesirable treatment.

The racial intolerance in Vietnam is low, especially toward blacks. The tendency to associate or identify those who have darker skin with low economic-social class or status is one of the causes that contributes to the racial intolerance. Those who have dark skin are those who have to work hard under the sun to earn a living, to struggle to make end-meets. They are sometimes the servants of the

²⁷ J. Kirk Felsman et al., Vietnamese Amerasians: Practical Implications of Current Research (Hanover, N.H.: Dept. of Psychiatry, Dartmouth Medical School, Office of Refugee Resettlement, 1989) 12.

²⁸ Cerquone, 239.

well-to-do families. Those who have white skin are often from well-to-do families which hire servants to do all the work, and therefore they regard themselves as better and superior. Vietnamese used to identify the blacks with the term "Moi" which often means the barbarians, the slaves, the people living in the deep jungles of Africa, or the uncivilized.

Vietnam is a "homogeneous, ethnically pure and patrilineal society."²⁹ Susanna McBee states that "ethnically pure Asians often consider such children [Amerasians] less than dirt."³⁰ In Vietnamese society, Amerasians and their families have to face "a political system that resents the United States."³¹

Moreover, as a country, Vietnam had been fighting for thousand of years against the Chinese, the French, the Japanese, and the United States for independence from foreign intrusion and invasion. Therefore, the concept of having association or mixing with anything foreign is repugnant. That concept lies in the survival instinct of the Vietnamese, to protect themselves from being wiped out and losing their unique identity.

At home, children have to deal with parental authority

²⁹ Gonzalez, B1-2.

³⁰ McBee, 49.

³¹ Tim Padgett, et al., "'Like Meeting My Dad'. Amerasians, Vets Bond," Newsweek, 9 Apr. 1990, 65.

and to uphold strong family ties. They also have to struggle with sibling rivalry, which normally means obeying the oldest brother or sister.

Vietnamese Religious Communities

The religious communities consist of the Christians, the Buddhist, Taoist, Confucianist communities and other groups of people who regard themselves as religiously oriented. For the purpose of this project, the term "Church" refers to the Protestant and Catholic communities. The term "church" is used solely to indicate the Vietnamese Congregation at Wesley United Methodist Church in San Diego.

Work Previously Done in the Field

Issues related to the Amerasians have been largely neglected. There are few works concerning the Amerasians written from a theological and pastoral perspective.

However, there was a survey done in 1985 by Marilyn Lacey of the United States Catholic Conference Migration and Refugee Services called In Our Fathers' Land: The Vietnamese Amerasians in the United States.³² There was some major work done in 1989 by J. Kirk Felsman and his colleagues from a psychological, clinical and psychiatric perspective.³³

In addition, Duc Xuan Nguyen, Director of the Amerasians Program of World Vision, has developed some practical programs called the Amerasian Mentor Project, the

³² Lacey, 1.

³³ Felsman et al., 5.

Amerasian Family Outreach Project and the Job Training and Placement Project, which enable local churches across the United States to reach out and meet some of the needs of the Amerasians in the beginning stage of their resettlement.

The Amerasian Mentor Project matched Amerasian youths with American Christians for a six-month period through building relationships, sharing life and cultural experiences, assisting the Amerasians to solve practical life problems, acquiring basic living skills, and providing mentors an opportunity to have cross-cultural understanding and experiences.

The Amerasian Family Outreach Project aims at meeting the needs of their whole families.³⁴ Duc Nguyen says, "The Mentor project has received much success because it really showed how much you care for the Amerasians."³⁵

There are many articles written about the Amerasians from a secular point of view which do not touch a major part of the spiritual needs. A most recent work is Steven Debonis' Children of the Enemy: Oral Histories of Vietnamese Amerasians and Their Mothers.³⁶

³⁴ Duc Xuan Nguyen, "Annual Report: Amerasian Refugee Assistance Program," (Monrovia: World Vision, 1992), photocopy.

³⁵ Duc Xuan Nguyen, interview with author, 20 Jan. 1993.

³⁶ Steven Debonis, Children of the Enemy: Oral Histories of Vietnamese Amerasians and Their Mothers (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1995).

Scope and Limitations of the Project

This project deals with Amerasians who have come to the United States through the Orderly Departure Program after the Amerasians Homecoming Act was passed by Congress in 1987 and enacted in March 1988.³⁷

The author interviewed five Amerasians who came to the Wesley United Methodist Church's sponsorship program, under the author's care as an associate pastor, to get their personal perspectives about their Amerasian stories. This project is written from an Asian Christian perspective.

Due to the limited scope of the project, only five different stories about the personal experiences and views of Amerasians are examined. Their names are slightly changed at their requests to protect their identities and privacy.

The author does not deal specifically with other refugees, immigrants or racially mixed persons, such as those who were born prior to the United States involvement in the Vietnam War. Also, the author does not deal specifically with those Amerasians who came to settle with their fathers or mothers in 1975 or those who escaped from Vietnam before the 1987 Homecoming Act. Those Amerasians are considered as refugees who escaped from Vietnam by boat or by foot.

However, with a better understanding of the Amerasians,

³⁷ Klein, Al.

many services and ministries to and with Amerasians can be used as general guidelines to deal with the issues of refugees in various situations across the United States, beyond the boundaries of San Diego.

Interview Process

The author asked five Amerasians for permission to conduct interviews. They were all living in the U.S at the time of the interview. One Amerasian gave her written permission by sending a letter. The interviews took place at their houses and also over the telephone. The author promised confidentially and assured them the interviews would only be used for the purpose of writing the thesis. These Amerasians gave their oral and written consent. Each interview lasted from forty-five minutes to an hour. There was no taping of the interviews but careful notes were written as each responded to the questions in the interview. Some of the questions asked of the Amerasians were:

Please tell me about yourself, your parents and your family. What was it like growing up as an Amerasian? How were you treated by your peers, your neighbors and the people where you lived? How did you deal with other people who mistreated you? How did you get here? What are some of the struggles you faced to get here? How long did it take you to get here? How do you feel about the ways people treat you in America? How do you feel when you come to Wesley United Methodist Church? What are you doing right now that helps you make adjustments to a new life in America? Do you hope to find your father again? What are some of your hopes and dreams?

The first person interviewed was Chanh Nguyen, a white male Amerasian. Chanh came to America alone, and the

accompanying family was not his real family. Hoang Le is a white male Amerasian who came to the United States with someone who pretended to be his mother. Thanh Le is a black female Amerasian who came here with her husband, son and aunt. The aunt has cared for her since Thanh was small. Anh Nguyen is a white female Amerasian who came with her stepparents. Anh has lived with her stepparents since she was very young. Minh Nguyen is a white female Amerasian who wrote a letter about her life story. Minh was not available for an interview. These Amerasians are in their twenties. Their stories are developed further in Chapter 3. They do not represent all Amerasians as a whole.

Procedure for Integration

The five personal interviews helped provide perspectives about what life really is like for them as Amerasians. The author has developed a good relationship with these Amerasians through close contacts as their associate pastor at Wesley United Methodist Church. The author also realizes that it is not easy to work with some of the Amerasians because trust and relationship have not been established. Suspicion that others would not listen and trust them, and fear that they would get hurt again, keep them from building deep relationships with others. The Vietnamese church members at Wesley United Methodist Church have cared for the Amerasians and helped their families in many practical ways to show that, together with God's

powerful love, we can overcome barriers and prejudices.

Through working with these Amerasians the past three years, the author has tried to earn their trust and respect in order for them to be open about their pains, hurts, disappointments, and struggles. By personally being there with them in their early stages of resettlement, by helping them open up and share those hidden feelings, and by accepting who they are, a healing ministry has been effectively meeting some of their physical, emotional, and spiritual needs.

The author also had interviews with some of the church leaders in the Southern California Protestant communities who have many past and present experiences in dealing with the Amerasians. Hai Nam Nguyen, Bau Ngoc Dang and Duc Xuan Nguyen are outstanding pastors who have pioneered exemplary ministries to the Amerasians in San Diego County and Orange County, California.

The author also interviewed two social workers, Na Thi Nguyen and VanPhi Nguyen, who have worked with the Amerasians to gain their perspectives on developing a better understanding of and working relationship with the Amerasians.

The author has used library research which provides some basis for the integration of pastoral care and theological reflection as a tool in dealing with the issue. As a Vietnamese-American pastor, the author has deep roots

in the Christian faith and uses the Bible and theology as main ingredients to guide the pastoral aspect of ministry. The author never thinks that one can separate the heart from the mind or the mind from the heart. In other words, theological and pastoral reflections must go together to support each other in order to make any person rounded in his/her thinking and whole in his/her heart.

Different Asian theological and pastoral perspectives approaching the issue of Han, the suppressed feelings of the Amerasians, are integrated in this project.

Pastoral care, visitation, follow-up programs and outreach programs conducted at Wesley United Methodist Church are examined as tools to minister to the Amerasians in holistic ways. Practical suggestions for providing pastoral care to the Amerasians are integrated throughout the chapters that deal with pastoral care for the Amerasians. Some of these practical suggestions will only work in the Vietnamese context and its culture.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter 1, Introduction, addresses the problem regarding the discrimination and mistreatment of the Amerasians. The importance of the problem shows why it is necessary for the author to address such a critical issue. Based on an Asian theological perspective, the thesis seeks to understand the Amerasians' struggles and situations in Vietnam and the United States in order to assist them better

in their new resettlement and to enable them to build effective lives through pastoral care and practical ministries. Definitions of major terms are given as well. Some previous extensive work done in the field is listed. Also the scope and limitation of the project are discussed in ways which introduce the procedure for integration.

Chapter 2, A Brief History of the United States' Involvement in Vietnam, presents a background for better understanding the sources of the problems concerning Amerasians.

Chapter 3 presents five stories of the Amerasians' struggles to fight the sense of loss of their biological fathers, their poverty, their discrimination, and their suffering under the Communist regime.

Chapter 4 examines a pastoral approach for understanding and working with Amerasians. Prejudices held against Amerasians are analyzed. The causes of the mistreatment toward Amerasians in the past and present are addressed. Both negative and positive attitudes and perspectives regarding the Vietnamese Amerasians are considered.

Psychological and pastoral needs of the Amerasians, due to mistreatment are also discussed. Then, pastoral care is emphasized as a tool for healing damaged emotions. Finally, the role of the Amerasians is emphasized in embracing God's healing power for themselves as they understand the dynamics

of the influence of the caring and healing community.

Chapter 5 explores the theological basis for understanding Amerasians from an Asian theological perspective. Some biblical images--such as the Genesis account of creation that speaks of us all being created in the image of God, and the "body of Christ" that speaks of unity--are incorporated. Then, various ways that create open dialogue between the religious communities and the Amerasians are incorporated.

Chapter 6 examines empowerment of Amerasians through pastoral care and practical ministries. Various ministries being carried out within the Vietnamese Wesley United Methodist Church including the sponsoring program, with a complete process of resettlement, plus education, job training and employment, are examined. The whole community approach uses pastors and lay people in sharing responsibilities to minister effectively to the Amerasians' needs. As the religious communities reach out to serve the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of the Amerasians, the Amerasians in their own unique ways respond to the love and care of the church, and therefore, want to be part of the worshipping and serving community.

The final chapter includes some suggestions for starting a ministry to and with the Amerasians. In conclusion, this thesis makes a few concrete suggestions in order for local churches and communities to respond to the

needs of the Amerasians in concrete and practical ways.

CHAPTER 2

A Brief History of the United States' Involvement
in VietnamBeginning of the Vietnam War

Before the United States' involvement in Vietnam in the 1960s, there were several fights among the Soviet Union, Communist China, and the United States, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces for power and control of strategic places in Europe, Asia, and Africa. The race for strategic advantage in nuclear power, advanced missiles, bombs, destructive weapons, and satellite launches was evident among the super powers.¹

Before the United States's involvement in Vietnam, the war had begun in 1946 between the French army and the Revolutionary League for the Independence of Vietnam under the organized leadership of Ho Chi Minh or Uncle Ho.² Bao Dai was the puppet emperor set up by the French to rule Vietnam from 1949-1954. Diem Dinh Ngo was sent to the South as the Premier under the Bao Dai's regime which suffered "economic and political chaos."³

After eight long years of fighting with the French army, the war finally ended in May 1954 when the Viet Minh

¹ United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., General Assembly, Vietnam: The Christian, the Gospel, the Church (Philadelphia: UPCUSA, 1967), 11-21.

² Trager, 56.

³ United Presbyterian Church, 44.

collapsed the Dien Bien Phu fortress. As the defeated French "left Saigon in 1954, they took with them 25,000 children of mixed couples."⁴ The French army was defeated and by the partition at the Geneva Conference, Vietnam was divided at the 17th parallel.⁵

Vietnam's First President

As the French withdrew, United States' involvement increased slowly but gradually. In a letter dated October 23, 1954, President Dwight Eisenhower indicated that the United States intended to back up Premier Diem Dinh Ngo with aid to make it a "strong, viable state, capable of resisting attempted subversion or aggression through military means."⁶

With the support of the United States, Premier Diem Dinh Ngo, on October 26, 1955, became the first president and proclaimed South Vietnam as the Republic of Vietnam. A National Assembly was formed despite opposition from the Communists. On October 26, 1956, Diem Dinh Ngo was sworn in again as he took the Presidential oath of office under the new Constitution.⁷

President Eisenhower continued the commitment of the United States to support the Republic of Vietnam with

⁴ Adrian Bradshaw, "Amerasians Left Behind," Geographical Magazine, July 1989, 26.

⁵ United Presbyterian Church, 10.

⁶ United Presbyterian Church, 45.

⁷ Trager, 133-35.

another letter on October 26, 1960, which stated:

For so long as our strength can be useful, the United States will continue to assist Vietnam in the difficult yet hopeful struggle ahead.⁸

It is one thing to show good intention of an ability to "assist Vietnam." It is another to conceal the military strategic agenda of using South Vietnam to control the whole Far East, which was endangered by the Communist expansion.

Neil Sheehan writes:

John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson led the United States to war in Vietnam at the beginning of the 1960s because they believed that North Vietnamese President Ho Chi Minh and his disciples were pawns of Communist China and that, in stopping them, the United States would prevent China from taking over the rest of Southeast Asia.⁹

The Communist regime of Ho Chi Minh in the North had firmly established its power following the 1954 defeat of the French. At the same time, the Soviet Union and Peking Communist China had sent aid to North Vietnam amounting to over \$100 million per year.¹⁰

Then, marking the beginning of the United States' presence in Vietnam, with the emphasis on humanitarian effort to help the poor country, President John F. Kennedy, on December 14, 1961, wrote to President Diem Dinh Ngo:

⁸ Trager, 142.

⁹ Neil Sheehan, "Turning the Other Cheek: Vietnamese Come to Terms with Their Past," Los Angeles Times, 30 Aug. 1992, M3.

¹⁰ United Presbyterian Church, 47.

We shall promptly increase our assistance to your defense effort as well as help relieve the destruction of the floods which you describe. I have already given the orders to get these programs underway.¹¹

Assassinations of the Presidents

Things suddenly changed for the worse on November 1, 1963, when a coup successfully assassinated both President Diem Ngo and his brother, Nhu.¹² About the same time in the United States, President Kennedy was assassinated. The new President, Lyndon B. Johnson, continued to assert the United States' position in helping to protect South Vietnam from the aggression of North Vietnam.

Escalation of the Vietnam War

According to Michael Novak, in February 1965 North Vietnam was bombed by the United States with the rationalization to stop the "foreign aggression" of the North. As the war escalated, the United States increased its presence in Vietnam to 200,000 troops.¹³ Novak also stated:

The official explanation of the massive use of American troops is that the North Vietnamese 325th Division moved into the South late in 1964.¹⁴

¹¹ Trager, 143.

¹² United Presbyterian Church, 65.

¹³ Michael Novak, "Stumbling Into War and Stumbling Out," in Vietnam: Crisis of Conscience, by Robert McAfee Brown, Abraham J. Heschel and Michael Novak (New York: Association Press, 1967), 32.

¹⁴ Novak, 31.

President Johnson stated again on July 28, 1965 the position of the United States.

Over eleven years, we have committed themselves and have promised to help defend this small and valiant nation. Strengthened by that promise, the people of South Vietnam have fought for many long years. Thousands of them have died. Thousands more have been crippled and scarred by war. We cannot now dishonor our word or abandon our commitment or leave those who believed us and who trusted us to the terror and repression and murder that would follow. This, then, my fellow Americans, is why we are in Vietnam.¹⁵

Defending a small nation was how the United States officially got involved in Vietnam. Michael Novak uses the phrase "America Takes Over" to describe the intensity of the war and goes on to say that by the end of 1966, about half a million American troops were sent to Vietnam.¹⁶

With this large number of troops and personnel, new services were born to meet the explosive needs of the massive troops. Many Vietnamese women felt compelled to carry on family responsibilities at home since their fathers and brothers had been conscripted. As a result, many of these women opened catering shops, bars in towns, or near military bases. Other women found work at the military bases to support their families. The new freedom found in working outside of the home presented problems of its own. Roles changed among family members. Women's priorities are rearranged between working outside the home to support their

¹⁵ Trager, 144.

¹⁶ Novak, 34.

families or being housewives. If both husband and wife worked, then servants had to be hired to do daily chores, such as cooking, taking kids to schools, and maintaining the house. Parents would no longer spend much time with the children and with each other. Therefore, many problems arise when the family structure is not preserved the way it had been.

Consequences and Scars of War

William P. Thompson, Chairman of the National Inquiry Group, gave a striking account of the consequences of that devastating war.

An estimated one-third of the Vietnamese people have been driven from their homes. Many have been forced into the cities and have become dependent for their economic survival on the prolongation of the war. Most are involved in providing services, from shoe-shining to prostitution, for the Americans. These large-scale and traumatic dislocations have disrupted the whole social fabric of the indigenous society. The traditional family structure has been virtually destroyed. Those not in the cities are in the squalid refugee camps. About half the population of these camps are children, most of the rest are women and old men.¹⁷

Defense of Vietnam and restoration of peace to the small country was not accomplished. Instead, heavy destruction was done to the nuclear family structure. Family members were separated from each other by the war and partially by the breaking down of the change in the economic system.

¹⁷ William P. Thompson, War Crimes: U.S. Priorities and Military Force, Report of the National Inquiry Group (New York: Dept. of International Affairs, National Council of Churches, 1972), 22.

Bok-Lim C. Kim in his article, "Asian Wives of U.S. Servicemen: Women in Shadows," describes the appearance of the women on the job market around the military bases.

Thus, major responsibilities were entailed by these young women at a time when the traditional sources of livelihood, i.e., farming, operating a family business, and outside employment, had virtually disappeared as a consequence of repeated battles and bombing. Ironically, the presence of a large U.S. military force in Asia often offered the only source of employment for local residents. Available jobs included work both on and off the military base as well as catering to military personnel. Thus, war and military occupation introduced unique and powerful elements into the social structures of those host countries, facilitating interpersonal relationships which would once have been unthinkable.¹⁸

The drastic shift in the social-economic levels springing from the large number of troops brought many women into the labor force. Their roles as housewives had been switched to co-providers. Their new associations with the foreign troops led them from casual relationships into sexual encounters. Amerasians were born out of these relationships. If their families did not accept the relationships, the women moved out and raised their children alone. This consequently became a factor contributing to the problem of the Amerasians as the Vietnamese women became entangled in relationships with American soldiers. As troops came and went, the Amerasians they left behind

¹⁸ Bok-Lim C. Kim, "Asian Wives of U.S. Servicemen: Women in Shadows," in Asian-Americans: Social and Psychological Perspectives, vol. 2, eds. Russell Endo, Stanley Sue and Nathaniel N. Wagner (Ben Lomond, Calif.: Science and Behavior Books, 1980), 232.

suffered humiliation and mistreatment.

Clearly, the presence of United States' soldiers helped in fighting the war, preventing the collapse of South Vietnam, and assisting the government in Vietnam; but it also brought along tremendous problems of its own to Vietnam. William Thompson described vividly the terrible problems regarding the Indochina War which included

murder, ill-treatment or deportation of civilians, plunder of property, wanton destruction of cities, towns, or villages, and devastation.¹⁹

Thompson went on to say that the involvement of the United States was so destructive that

American bombs have claimed over one million civilian casualties and driven an estimated one-third of the South Vietnamese population from their homes.²⁰

Life changed dramatically for the Vietnamese people. Many Vietnamese women, formerly housewives accustomed to working inside the boundary of the house, now also worked outside of the house.

The United States military officers, advisors, civilian aid personnel, social workers and soldiers did indeed fight the war and helped the South Vietnam humanitarian effort; but, they also got involved and enmeshed in inter-racial, personal relationships with the Vietnamese women. Many Amerasians were conceived after a night at a local bar

¹⁹ Thompson, 19.

²⁰ Thompson, 21.

because their poor mothers had to work as prostitutes in order to feed the family.²¹

However, according to a survey done by Sister Marilyn Lacey, one should not categorize Vietnamese women who had relationships with the American soldiers. Lacey says:

They were not all bar-girls or prostitutes whose casual encounters left them pregnant. Nor were they all uneducated country peasants looking for a good time in the city. On the contrary, only 8% of the mothers surveyed had no education. A remarkably high 52% had studied 5 or more years, and 20% of them had been in school for more than 8 years. They worked in Vietnam as shop owners and teachers, hotel clerks and nurses, bank tellers, seamstresses, interpreters. They staffed the military cafeterias, cleaned the barracks, operated the laundries--and yes, they worked the nightclubs and bars.²²

There are unwritten stories where women were, in fact, raped by American soldiers out of madness and anger because they had failed to capture the Communists in certain villages. Amerasians born this way have little chance of knowing their fathers.

Some soldiers who fell in love with the Vietnamese women they met through employment did marry them and have children of their own.²³ The Amerasians born out of these legitimate relationships had better support from their Amerasian families. Before the fall of Saigon on April 30,

²¹ "Home to America, If Not to Daddy," The Economist, 19 May 1990, 40.

²² Lacey, 6.

²³ Jeannie Ralston, "Homecoming," McCall's, June 1986, 99-101.

1975, many people had looked to the American soldiers as the "good guys" of the most powerful country. Everything about America was considered "good." A woman who had a genuine relationship established with an American was considered good and lucky. However, some people who were leaning toward the Communists and stressing on maintaining a pure race expressed suspicion and hostility toward those who had any association with foreigners. Bok-Lim C. Kim says:

Once Asian women had begun to date U.S. servicemen, they were uniformly treated with suspicion and contempt by their community. Some of this hostility was directly related to the community/family suspicion of the U.S. military in general. In some cases, initial skepticism was transformed to general support and/or resignation.²⁴

As a result, through many different situations and circumstances ranging from legal or legitimate to illegitimate relationships between the American soldiers and the Vietnamese women, the Amerasians were born out of these relationships. With much love for the children and with the standing tradition of a society where abortion was not allowed, the children were carried to full term, born and then given to someone else to raise, usually to the poor grandparents who lived in the countryside. Grandparents traditionally have great love for their grandchildren, and would not let them be abandoned on the streets. To have the grandparents taking care of the Amerasian children took

²⁴ Bok-Lim Kim, "Asian Wives," 233.

pressure off the mothers so they could continue to work or socialize without interference. Many Amerasians who lived with their grandparents hardly saw their mothers until the fall of Saigon.

The Fall of Saigon

As the long and destructive war came to an end on April 29, 1975, the United States Embassy in Saigon closed its doors for the last time. Helicopters flew about Saigon trying to rescue the last Americans from the United States Embassy. At 8 a.m., April 30, 1975, a CH-46 helicopter landed safely on top of the U.S. Embassy to lift off the last eleven marines to the U.S. fleet in the South China Sea.²⁵ The helicopter, taking the last Americans out of Saigon, ended the long destructive war that claimed 58,000 United States soldiers and personnel.²⁶ Hundreds of thousand of Vietnamese fighting on both sides are unaccounted. Millions of Vietnamese people's lives were shattered in fear and helplessness. Multitude of children's lives were affected.

Chaos and confusion, horror and looting, loud sirens mixed with the soft, crying voices of those who were searching for loved ones--these words barely describe what happened. In the movie Heaven and Earth released in 1993,

²⁵ Steven Strasser, et al., "The Legacy of Vietnam. 55 Days of Shame," Newsweek, 15 Apr. 1985, 46.

²⁶ Strasser, 47.

director Oliver Stone has portrayed vividly the chaos and confusion when Vietnam fell into the hand of the Communists in April 1975.²⁷

I witnessed that fateful day of April 30, 1975, as the tanks drove into the President's palace and the Communist flag was raised on top of that building. I was afraid as I looked at the Communists marching into the city. A rumor spread that a bloodbath would occur, which terrified the people. Many families escaped Vietnam by boats for fear of persecution. Those who had any relationship with the former Republic of South Vietnam concealed or burned all clothes, medals, personal identifications, birth certificates, marriage licenses, and any files which exposed their past history with the United States, for fear of revenge from the Communists.

After the Fall of Saigon

With the new Communist regime in Vietnam, propaganda spread that "America is bad and corrupted." Anything, including flags, pictures, and official documents related to the former regime of South Vietnam or to America was considered illegal possessions. If the Communists found anyone with such illegal possessions, they would be arrested and severely punished. The Communists with their new power could arrest, on any slight charge, anyone who dared say or

²⁷ Oliver Stone, dir., Heaven and Earth, with Le Ly, Tommy Lee Jones, and Joan Chen, Columbia, 1993.

offer any resistance to them.

From Ho Chi Minh City to the rural areas, children and adults were bombarded everyday with negative slogans and bad images of the Americans. To the Communists, the Amerasians were also considered children of the "bad guys" and became victims of the United States' abandonment.

The Fall of Saigon marked a new episode for Vietnam which had many serious problems and challenges. The Communist regime had to win the peoples' hearts. They had to subdue any resistance and to establish new power and control. They had to rebuild the whole country and set up local authority. At the same time, they had to deal with the Amerasians, the former soldiers and officers of the South, who worked, fought or had close ties with the former Republic or with the United States.

Meanwhile, the United States tried hard to forget the war they had lost terribly. It denied any responsibility for the destruction of the nuclear family, the social order and the large number of the Amerasians it had caused. After the Fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, the United States left Vietnam with its many problems, many pains, and many broken hearts.

One of these problems was the large group of Amerasians, the children of the American fathers and Vietnamese mothers. The mothers, who were in great distress with their unwanted Amerasians, were abandoned without any

support. Many American fathers had died in battle or gone back to the United States to start a new life when their service was over, and the wives and the children never heard anything from them.

In the case of Mary Lam, a black Amerasian, her dream was cut short when she came to America to find her father, only to discover that he had died in 1974. No wonder they had not heard from him for a long time. Through the help of Bree Lafreniere, a coordinator at the Tacoma Catholic Community Services, she was finally reunited with her father's family in Chicago in December 1991, and is continuing school there.²⁸

Many American fathers promised to write or send financial support for their family, but failed to honor their promises and were never to be heard from again. How true is the phrase "out of sight, out of mind." Adrian Bradshaw expressed that these Amerasians were "waiting usually in vain, for their estranged GI fathers to return and whisk them away."²⁹ Erin Marcus, a writer for the Washington Post, wrote a story of two Amerasians who have located their father in America through the services of the Red Cross. But sadly, their father wants nothing to do with

²⁸ Gary Larson, "Home for Christmas: A Family Opens Its Arms to Daughter Who Came to America to Find Her Father," News Tribune (Tacoma, Wash.), 23 Dec. 1991, A1.

²⁹ Bradshaw, "Amerasians Left Behind," 26.

the past.³⁰ But some fathers, who seriously loved their children and their wives, after retiring from the service or tour of duty tried to make contact or go back to Vietnam to find these Amerasians. For many of these fathers, their efforts were in vain. Barry Huntoon, an Army Medic, had lost hope of finding his daughter and family. Fortunately, one day when reading the August 1985 issue of Life Magazine, Huntoon found a picture of his Amerasian daughter, Tuyet Mai. He then contacted his lawyer, and he was reunited with his daughter again.³¹

Unfortunately, some of the GIs' wives died during the war and their children were taken in by relatives or whoever found them abandoned on the streets. Other women remarried and moved to the countryside, not wanting their children to see their fathers again due to the shame and the guilt they experienced.

No one wanted to believe or accept the destruction of the war and the problems it had brought. Many people were victims of the war, and the Amerasians tragically became the target of people's hatred. The society, then, did not permit its people to get involved in relationships with foreign soldiers or foreigners. The thinking of society at

³⁰ Erin Marcus, "In America, Amerasian Odyssey. Few Find the Fathers Who Left Them Behind in Vietnam," Washington Post, 8 Mar. 1992, A1.

³¹ Philip Jones Griffiths, "Paradise Found," Life, Dec. 1987, 10.

the time was that only loose girls in bars or prostitutes would get involved in sexual relationships with the American soldiers.

Many who kept the traditional values of being virtuous and patriotic strongly disliked families who had daughters involved with the American troops. Therefore, the Amerasians born out of these relationships experienced strong reactions from society in general.

However, according to a survey done in 1985 by Sister Marilyn Lacey, the "harsh discrimination against Amerasians families was more sporadic and regional than concerted or countrywide." Lacey also says that everyone else suffered "along with the rest of the population from the disintegration of the pre-1975 social order, the collapse of the wartime Saigon economy."³²

Many young women whose relationships with GIs were not approved by their families were rejected, often with a phrase like "in our family, we never have a daughter like you who does not obey us." By this the family was usually inclined to ask their daughters the following questions:

Why do you associate with the black soldiers/officers instead of the white ones? [Parents want their daughters to marry up and white means superior!] Are you sure that they [the soldiers/officers] did not marry before and have families in the United States? Can they provide and take good care of you and our families? Would they take us to America?

³² Lacey, 10.

Therefore, children usually had to comply with their parents' desires. If the children disobeyed the parents and went on their own, they became the disgrace of the family. Understanding the values of this society which emphasizes "saving face," or keeping the honor of one's family and obeying the parents may ease the confusion for the reader. Many mothers of the Amerasians, who could not stand the family pressures, moved out of the home. As a result of this moving out, breaking the family tie, being cut off from their relatives, many Amerasians have suffered more.

Amerasians have suffered years of being looked down upon as inferior, cut off from their loved ones, and being degraded and marginalized. In other words, they have no other identity, except the Amerasian identity of one without a father. This left a big hole in the Amerasians' lives. It is a great loss for many of them. A Vietnamese saying, "Con không cha như nhà không nóc," describes the fate of a person without a father as like a house without a roof. If a house has no protection from the roof, it is not really a house.

Therefore, many Amerasians, as a result of not having and knowing their biological fathers, have no solid sense of self. They do not know who they really are. They cannot be proud of who they are because the public image of them is often negative. There is an urgent need to care for the Amerasians and to help them learn to be proud of who they

are and to celebrate their genuine sense of identity.

They also need people who love and care for them genuinely and give them second chances and even third chances to start a new life. They need new friends who can accept them for who they are at school, at social gatherings, at work and even at church. They need encouragements, patience from ESL teachers, peers and counselors to help them complete school. They need someone who can believe in them, that they will make it far in life and be successful in America. They need understanding and caring people to help them build effective lives in their new homes.

CHAPTER 3

Five Stories of the Amerasians' Struggles
to Fight against Loss, Poverty and DiscriminationThe "Gold Children"

Before the Amerasian Homecoming Act opened the way for the Amerasians to come to America, they were treated like dust--as if they were nothing of value to anyone in society. No one really wanted to socialize or associate with them. But suddenly, when the Homecoming Act was passed in 1987 and enacted in 1988, wealthy people from Ho Chi Minh City came to the rural areas, the villages, the Economic Zones to look for the Amerasians. These wealthy and rich people were those who wanted to leave the country, but for various reasons could not do so. Ironically, the Amerasians now are treated nicely because they have become the "exit visas" for some.¹ They become valuable in some people's eyes.

Wealthy people bought them new clothes and paid large amounts of gold or U.S. dollars to them or their families. Amerasians are now the "gold children."² Rich people sought them out from rural areas to urban cities and brought them back to the Ho Chi Minh Amerasian Transit Center to complete the paperwork.³

¹ Gourevitch, L23.

² William Branigin, "Vietnamese Try to Buy American Dream. Families Fake Relationships to Children of GIs, Obtain Visas," Washington Post, 19 Feb. 1993, A1.

³ Mott, E9.

The Immigration Process

Many Amerasians came and stayed at the new American-built Amerasian Transit Center.⁴ Here they stayed and completed the necessary paperwork. Marilyn Lacey lists six tedious steps of completing the paperwork process before a visa is granted:

1. Make certain that one's name gets on a valid family register.
2. Submit an ODP form along with photos to the local neighborhood leader, who will forward it to the district mayor, who will forward it to the Immigration Office on Nguyen Du Street in Ho Chi Minh City.
3. A written notice that the application has reached Nguyen Du and that the applicant must appear for a personal interview with Vietnamese officials.
4. Once the application is approved, an applicant is interviewed by Ministry of Internal Affairs on Nguyen Trai Street to receive the government's coveted "exit permit".
5. Persons granted exit permits then have an interview with a representative of the receiving country at the UNHCR office in Thu Duc, near Ho Chi Minh City.
6. Undergo required medical screenings. After the Embassy has approved the case for U.S. entry, wait for names to be posted on the passenger lists of the weekly flights departing Tan Son Nhut airport outside Ho Chi Minh City.⁵

After completing the process, Amerasians and their families could go to the Philippines for six months to study English and for cultural orientation to prepare for their new life in America.

During the process of completing the paperwork, the

⁴ Mott, E9.

⁵ Lacey, 18-20.

wealthy people often bribed the Vietnamese officials to allow them to go with the Amerasians as fake families.⁶ Of course, the government officials denied all the charges as if everything was clean and legal.

These wealthy people told the Amerasians that they would help them to go to America, but in turn, the Amerasians had to bring the rich people along as their accompanying families.⁷ People with money and connections used the Amerasians as their free tickets to America. However, some fraudulent cases have been caught and the visas have been revoked by the U.S. officials.⁸ The fraudulent cases that have not been discovered could cost the U.S. about \$150 million in federal funds. William Branigin says, "the U.S. pays \$140 to the Vietnamese government for each person it processes for emigration but the payments encourage Vietnamese officials to process fraudulent applicants."⁹ The tax money has been misused.

One must understand at this point that the number of boat people had declined considerably because of fear of pirates, tropical storms, and flimsy boats that could not

⁶ Branigin, "Vietnamese Try to Buy American Dream," A1.

⁷ Melinda Beck, et al., "The Legacy of Vietnam. Where Is My Father?" Newsweek, 15 Apr. 1985, 55.

⁸ William Branigin, "For a Few Caught in Repatriation Fraud, Life in Limbo," Washington Post, 19 Feb. 1993, A26.

⁹ Branigin, "Vietnamese Try to Buy American Dream," A1.

take them safely to shore. Those people, who had tried hard many times before to escape from Vietnam in order to have a better life and freedom, grasped the Amerasians as their way to leave the country legally, quickly and safely. That is why after the Homecoming Act was passed, suddenly there has been a market of people "selling and buying" people. One can compare this horrible deed to the slave trade in the 17th-18th centuries in America. It was a golden opportunity for many people to become rich fast. It was a chance for some people to leave Vietnam and reach a land of gold, or a land of milk and honey.

According to research done in December 1989 about the Vietnamese Amerasians population allowed to resettle in America, the estimated figure rose from 24,000 in 1988 to 40-50,000 in 1989.¹⁰ According to one report, until June 1992, the total number of Amerasians and their families departing from Vietnam reached 65,798.¹¹ That number might be higher now. The Amerasians are scattered all over the United States, but the most heavily populated area is in Orange County, California.

Five Stories of Struggles with Abuses

The Amerasians' stories of struggles with abuses, shared below, are not representative for all the Amerasians.

¹⁰ Felsman et al., 9.

¹¹ Duc Xuan Nguyen, "Annual Report: Amerasian Refugee Assistance Program," (Monrovia: World Vision, 1992), 2.

Each story is unique on its own, but some similarities can be seen between them.

Chanh Nguyen's Story

Chanh Nguyen is a white Amerasian, who told the following story about himself.¹² Chanh was promised a beautiful girl to become his wife by a family only if this family's daughter could get to America. A big wedding would be prepared for Chanh and this girl. The girl's family told Chanh and their daughter that they should act and treat each other as though they were married when they went for interviews at the Embassy.

Thinking that everybody must treat him fairly well now, Chanh pressured the family for more money to spend before leaving Vietnam. As the family was afraid he would change his mind, they complied and gave him more money. He then put pressure on the girl to have sex. After all, he said to the girl, "We will get married anyway!" The girl yielded to his demand and had sex with him. The family comforted their daughter and told her to try to endure just a little longer. When they got to the Philippines, Chanh pressured her more, but she did not want to comply or suffer any more. They split after a terrible argument. Chanh went to America alone feeling dejected. The girl and her family came to America later.

Chanh had conflicts with his sponsors who would not

¹² Chanh Nguyen, interview with author, 22 Feb. 1993.

treat him fairly and take good care of him. After a few months on welfare, Chanh left the sponsors to stay with his friends. Chanh had no industrial skill or experience in the job market and, therefore, it was hard for him to find a job. He had no money to pay for the rent. Finally, he said, "I decided to sleep on the street and eat at a homeless shelter."

I met him, talked with him, and felt pity for his poor condition. I then took him home and gave him something to eat. After lunch, I gave Chanh luggage and some nice clothes. I drove him back, gave him my telephone number and said, "If you need anything, call me." Later in the week about 8:30 p.m. one evening, he called and said urgently, "My mother in Vietnam is really sick. I need some money to send back there to help." The next morning he came with a friend, and I loaned him fifty dollars. He said, "I will pay you back soon." I had the address and telephone number of the place where he said he lived. That was the last time I saw Chanh. I looked for him many times, drove to that address, called the telephone number which he had given me. But he no longer lived there.

Many Amerasians, like Chanh, were promised by the rich people in Vietnam "a promising future in America" and "a chance of a lifetime" of finding their lost fathers again. But sadly, the main reason for these rich people to promise something like that is because these Amerasians were their

free tickets to America. Anyone who can pay the Amerasians some money, and pay the local government officials a lump sum of money under the table, can go to the United States through an Orderly Departure Program which allows people to leave the country by airplane.

Since the Homecoming Act has allowed these Amerasians to emigrate as immigrants, they can then bring their accompanying families along. In many cases, these accompanying families are not the Amerasians' real families.

In TrangBom, DongNai Province, there are many hidden services that produce fake personal identifications, false birth certificates and street addresses so that persons can fool the United States representatives. A birth certificate costs about six dollars.¹³ In other words, these secret services have received a lot of money from rich families to falsely document Amerasian relatives.

Hoang Le's Story

In the case of Hoang Le, a white Amerasian, he was bought by a woman called "Tam" whom he had to call "Mom."¹⁴ Hoang's typical case happened like this. According to Hoang: One day a woman called Tam found him on the streets of Saigon or Ho Chi Minh City. She said that she desperately wanted to go to America because there she would have a better future. She had tried to escape from Vietnam

¹³ Branigin, "Vietnamese Try to Buy American Dream," A1.

¹⁴ Hoang Le, interview with author, 29 Apr. 1994.

by boat many times but failed. She said that Hoang could have a better future too. Tam promised to help Hoang find his dad again.

Many of Hoang's friends had already filled out the applications for exit visas. But Hoang had no money to pay to the right people who had the authority to speed up the tedious paperwork process. So he decided that since he could go for free, why not take the offer of this woman. Tam promised Hoang many things and gave him some good clothes to dress him up. She taught him to remember her birthday and many things about her and the family history so that all information would fit perfectly when people interviewed him.

In Vietnam, there is no computer system to check one's Social Security number or home address. One can just say, "Due to the war, we have lost everything, and this piece of identification is the only thing I have." Hoang had to call Tam "Mom" many times until that became very familiar to him. Hoang had some money to spend on himself. He seemed to like the adventure.

Hoang and Tam passed all the interviews, the blood tests, the skin tests and the sputum tests. Indeed, they passed through all the security checkpoints, which were set up only to get some more money from the poor people. All the rich people got through if they contributed to the whole corrupt system and paid the officials from the bottom to the

top. According to Dianne Klein, about "10% to 30%" of the cases were fraudulent.¹⁵ If one had money, then everything would go well.

When the day had come for Hoang and Tam to leave Viet Nam, Tam said "good-bye" to her family. Hoang had no one close to him except some of his Amerasian friends, who shed some tears. They boarded the airplane and flew to the Philippine Refugee Processing Center (PRPC).

The first few weeks at the new center in the Philippines were satisfactory. But things slowly started to change. Hoang met some of his Amerasian friends who told him to "make waves" in order to get some money from Tam. She yielded and gave him some money to buy some drinks. Hoang got drunk a few times and threatened to kill Tam. She responded to his threats by not giving him any more money. He had to beg her and said that he would change. They went to ESL classes to study English. Tam studied hard to prepare for the future while Hoang did not seem to learn much at all. Hoang's mind focused only on what he could have now. If not gratified instantly, he would throw a tantrum or lose his temper. The worst thing he could do was to reveal to the authorities of the camp their illegal relationship. If so, she might be returned to Vietnam while he could still be allowed to go to America.

Returning to Vietnam was a scary thought for these

¹⁵ Klein, A12.

people who had paid for the Amerasians to go with them. They lived in fear of their true identity being exposed. After six months of ESL training passed, they boarded an airplane and headed for America. On the final trip, each thought differently. Hoang thought, "She will dump me and go on her own." Tam pondered, "Life will be much easier without him. I'd rather be on my own."

Arriving at the San Diego airport, they were greeted by a group of friendly people from the church. These church members helped them settle in a one bedroom apartment. Tam slept in the bedroom while Hoang slept on the couch or a mattress put in the living room. That was how it was in order to help them save money to pay for the rent and food. After completing all initial paperwork and health screening tests, Tam enrolled in ESL class, level six, while Hoang slowly got himself to school and started at the first level.

They stayed with each other for a few months until they received their Green Cards and money from the welfare department. They had a few arguments. Hoang got drunk a few times and complained that things were different now. Hoang said, "Tam did not treat me the same any more. She had used me." But, Tam said, "Hoang is lazy. He did not want to study or do anything. He wanted to go and meet some of his friends all the time!" They split after an argument over money. Hoang felt sad and abandoned one more time.

The pastors made telephone calls and visits to listen,

to advise the family and to find some ways to assist Hoang and the family to develop a working relationship. But after many visits, pastoral care, and encouragement from the church members who tried to mend the broken relationship, their relationship has not changed for the better. Hoang wanted to do things his own way, and Tam could not put up with Hoang any more. It seemed best to let them go and do whatever they wanted. The church has not heard from Hoang again.

Many Amerasians came to America through the sponsorship of the church or a charitable agency with similar stories. For those Amerasians who have established good relationships with the church that sponsored them and who stayed in school while finding some work with the help of their sponsors, they slowly developed their skills. Other Amerasians broke away from their sponsors or accompanied families soon after arrival, and rarely do the sponsors know where they are or what they are doing. There are no scientific statistics available to show how many Amerasians pursue education or find work, and how many do not. Once in a while, one finds a successful or unsuccessful story of an Amerasian who makes the headlines of a newspaper.¹⁶ Meanwhile, many people seem not to care if Amerasians exist in America at all.

¹⁶ Chris Aguilar, "Reversal of Fortune: Vo Finds Home on Mat," Orange County (Calif.) Register, 28 Dec. 1993, V22. Loi Vo is a black male Amerasian, also the Brea Olinda High senior who is one of the best wrestlers in the Orange League Championship.

Thanh Le's Story

Thanh Le is a black female Amerasian who was born in 1971 in DaNang, in the middle part of Vietnam.¹⁷ Her parents did not marry, and she was born during the four years they lived together. When his tour of service was over, her American father asked if her mother would like to go to America. Her mother sadly said, "No, I cannot leave my family behind. I have to stay here and raise the kid." Then the father left them with some money, and Thanh and her mother never heard anything from him again. Thanh's mother had to struggle a lot during that time to support the family. Thanh barely remembers her father's face.

However, she still remembers that the place where she was born and raised was very poor. It was flooded most of the time. Due to the severe weather and lack of outside support, the family did not have enough food to eat.

The family was very poor, and though she wanted to go to school they could barely support her through second grade. While attending second grade, some boys teased her about her blackness. Day after day, the teasing got worse, until her mother decided to take her out of school. They felt very insulted by the people around them. Thanh and her mother wanted to live a peaceful life but people would not let them.

¹⁷ Thanh Le, interview with author, 2 Feb. 1994; and telephone interview with author, 22 Nov. 1995.

To make matters worse, Thanh's mother died when she was eleven years old. After her mother died, Thanh stayed with her aunt who worked hard to raise her. She had felt abandoned by her father and now the only one left who cared, loved and accepted her, was her aunt. The boys in the village often made fun of her when they saw her helping her aunt outside the house. The negative comments haunted her.

The Communists looked down on her every time they met her on the streets. They asked, "Where is your father? Why did he not care for you? He is not good!" She was very afraid every time she had to see them in the village. Another time, while working in the field, her friends told her that some wealthy people were coming to persuade her to apply for a visa so she could go to America. She was terrified when she first heard that these wealthy people would insist in helping her come to America. She had to hide many times from these people. Thanh continued to live in fear of the idea that she had to leave her aunt behind.

Then, in 1989, Thanh met a man called Hong and married him a year later. When her husband told her to apply to go to America again, she agreed because this time her aunt, who raised her, could go with them. Thanh and her aunt did not have any money to pay the high fees to complete the paperwork in Vietnam. But her husband's family was rich. They paid all the fees and completed all the required paperwork, which took about two years.

The system of completing the paperwork was corrupted by the government. There were many stages of completing the paperwork and, to speed up the process, one had to pay off the government. The six steps in the process have been reported by Lacey and described earlier in this study. The process is time consuming, energy drenching, and expensive, and is filled with painful insults and crude humiliation.¹⁸

However, Thanh said thankfully, "Finally, in summer 1992, after all the delay and waiting, the day for us to leave Vietnam had come." They had a newborn son then. Thanh and her husband had to go to Ho Chi Minh City to board the airplane which then took them to the Philippines Refugee Processing Center. All five people in Thanh's family, including her aunt and her husband's sister, stayed at this Philippine Refugee Processing Center for six months for cultural orientation and to learn English before they could come to America. Anxiously, they left Vietnam knowing not what the future would hold in store for them.

While waiting in the Philippines Refugee Processing Center, Thanh and her husband's relationship was not good due to his socialized Vietnamese friends telling him, "It is stupid of you to marry a Black Amerasian!" Her husband got drunk a few times and threatened to beat her and to leave her when they got to America. They fought over the responsibilities of each person in the family such as who

¹⁸ Lacey, 18-20.

was supposed to do what in the home and who would keep the money and decide how to spend it. Thanh recalls her husband saying, "Now, I still need you, but when we get there, you will go your way, and I will go my way. We will not bother each other. I can not stand this relationship any more." However, they did make up and apologized to each other and continued to attend classes there until the day they all left to resettle in San Diego.

For Thanh and her family, the first few months in America were very difficult. She felt sad because her life was not the way she thought it would be. She missed the simple life in Vietnam. Thanh and her family had to adjust to a new life, new customs and a new culture.

In Vietnam, she did not have to worry about paying the rent. Now there was rent to pay on the first of every month, which was especially hard to pay with the pitifully low welfare assistance from the government. In Vietnam she lived in a small village, but now she had to adjust to life in a big city. She had to learn how to speak English because all paperwork and business transactions require at least a small amount of English. There was a big language barrier for her. Thanh and her family were fortunate to discover a Vietnamese community, with Vietnamese markets. With a Christian community at Wesley, she found care and assistance and hope to live.

While carrying her second baby, Thanh and her husband

fought many times about money. They quarreled many times about the way they should spend the money. She wanted to save the money in order take care of the new baby and thought maybe, when they saved enough, they could buy a car. But her husband kept the money and secretly sent it back to his family members in Vietnam. He also got drunk a few times, became violent, and hit her. She called the pastors for help. The police also came and filed a police report. Many visits were made by the pastors to provide more pastoral care for both of them. Many good neighbors from the church also came to comfort and counsel the couple.

Unfortunately, one time during an intense fight, Thanh's husband kicked her hard in the stomach. She thought she might have a miscarriage, but thank God the fetus was fine. She wanted to call the police but felt pitiful that the police might put him in jail.

Then one day, without saying any word to her or the aunt, the husband left with their savings. However, he called a few times checking on her and the children, and once expressed his wish to return home. But she said, "Our life here is peaceful without you. I would rather stay this way and raise the children with God's help."

The church has helped her through the critical period before and after she delivered her second child. We helped name and baptize her daughter. She and her aunt faithfully attend church with the children. The children now are

growing up as fine and well-behaved children, who like Sunday school and their friends at church very much.

Through many stages of resettlement, Thanh has adjusted well to a new life. She studied Vietnamese and English, and she passed the written and driving test for an automobile operator's license. Thanh said,

I tried so hard not to be nervous while driving with the examiner on the road, but I failed six times. The teacher who taught me how to drive cursed and hit me many times on the back and said that I am slow and stupid. "Maybe, you will never pass it," he said. But, thank God, I made it the seventh time. On that day, before the driving test, I prayed to God to help me to be calm. God did! I felt peaceful, and I passed it with a high score.

It was a big accomplishment for Thanh. She is proud of herself. Thanh is now a happy and thankful person. She is raising her two children with help from her loving aunt and the support of the church.

Regarding the search for her father, Thanh said this in the interview: "I do not have the desire to search for my father any more. He had forsaken us. Before, I hoped to find him and know his face, but now I just want to live a quiet life and raise my children here."

Anh Nguyen's Story

Here is another typical story of an Amerasian who has struggled to try to make a new life. Anh Nguyen is a white Amerasian who does not know who her father is.¹⁹ She did

¹⁹ Anh Nguyen, telephone interviews with author, 1 May 1993 and 29 Nov. 1995.

not have a close relationship with her biological mother. According to what her grandparents and stepparents told her, her mother was a prostitute who was rarely home. She often got involved sexually with the American soldiers. After Anh's biological mother gave birth to her at a local hospital, she left her for the grandparents to raise. Because of the cocaine her mother used while carrying her in her womb, Anh was born with chronic headaches which still affect her studying.

Despite an unloving mother, Anh was loved by her grandparents who took very good care of her. Anh later was adopted by her new stepparents who genuinely love and care for her. Anh has always considered her stepparents as natural parents.

Living among the Communists, she often was the target of taunts and harassment. They used to tell her that she did not have a good mother, which hurt her and brought tears to her eyes. Her stepbrothers had often defended her from the attacks of other boys in the village.

She quit school when she was in the third grade after some boys from school destroyed a small bridge over a stream she used to get home. She had to swim home one day, and when her stepparents found out, they took her out of school and kept her inside the home. She stayed home with them until late 1992 when she came to America. Anh is now living with her stepparents in San Diego, California.

For Anh, the love of the family is the strength that has carried her through. Anh Nguyen said, "I never had any desire to find my American father."

Her chronic headaches have not occurred as often as they did in Vietnam thanks to the medicine and medical services she receives in America. Anh and her family are well accepted into the life of the church at Wesley. The family is thankful to God and the church while trying their best to adapt to their new life everyday. Once in a while, when I see them at church, they often show appreciation to the church for helping them fill out paperwork at the Social Services and translating for them at the medical clinic. Anh and her stepparents regularly attend church and are well liked by everybody. With many pastoral visits, sometimes having a meal together with the whole family, and regular telephone calls, the pastors gain a better understanding of what has been happening in their lives and seek to provide some ways to assist them in making good adjustments in their resettlement.

As pastors and care givers make a strong effort to make regular contacts through visits and telephone calls, they will develop a strong base for a caring ministry. With encouragement and love from the church members, the family wants to put the past behind them and get on with their new lives.

Anh is now taking English as a Second Language at night

at a local adult school. Though she has struggled in school learning the new language, she likes to study to improve herself and develop her confidence. She got her automobile operator's license last year after three tries, which was a big accomplishment for her. She has met an American military officer and is making plans for their wedding next year. At the end of her interview, Anh said, "I always feel loved by my parents and respected by them. That makes me happy. They are all I need. I thank God for them."

Minh Nguyen's Story

Minh Nguyen, another Amerasian in her twenties, wrote the following desperate letter from the Philippine Refugee Processing Center, as a plea for help and an understanding of her struggle and ordeal.

I am writing this letter to share with you about the pain and suffering of an Amerasian daughter who had no father. Because when I was about two years old, my American father had returned to the United States, and I lost the love, happiness and security of a daughter who had both parents. My mother and I had not heard anything from the American father. An Amerasian's life like mine is not very fortunate. My mother used to tell me that I was very fortunate when my American father lived with my mother. Then on April 1975, the Communists took over South Vietnam and seized everything that we had. Our money and the house that my father bought for us were taken away. My mother and I had to live with our grandparents in Quinhon. Then, after seizing the house, the Communists forced my grandfather to re-education camp because they said that we had relation with America, and the proof was that I was the Amerasian. We were counted as their enemies. From then on, they harrassed and tortured my mother. They put her in prison many times. I stayed home with my two younger siblings. I will never forget my poor mother. When it was time for

me to go to school like any other children, I was rejected, taunted, insulted and cursed by my peers. They called me "My lai" which means Amerasian or "My con" which means a child whose father was American. Some of the students looked at me with disdain, like a look of deep anger into the enemy's eyes. I repressed all the boiling emotional feelings of hurt and resentment that I felt inside so that I could continue with school. I wanted to learn so much, but when I got to school, I felt worried, afraid and deplored. I felt very lonely for I have no friend, no Amerasian friends. I dropped out of school, [and] stayed home to help my mother feed the animals. I tried to earn a living by working for others. I still remember when I was eleven years old, my mother was very concerned for our poor and hungry family. When she got sick, the family was even poorer. My mother died when I was twelve years old. I became an orphan who no longer had anyone to call mom and dad. I worked for anyone who hired me doing anything to earn money to raise my siblings. Unfortunately, we still did not have enough food to eat. We lacked many basic things. Then the idea to escape from Vietnam by boat came. But after many trials, there was no success. When I heard about the policy that allowed the Amerasians to be united with their fathers in America, I returned to Ho Chi Minh City to apply for exit visa. Though I am poor, I do not want to sell my body. With the help of a friend, I met a family named Tong who promised that I could go with them. They paid for everything! When I expressed my wish to go to DamSen, west of Ho Chi Minh City, a center where many Amerasians have been raised in an orphanage, they threatened that I would be harmed and beaten by other Amerasians. I was scared, decided to stay with them for a while. I had to sell vegetables to earn some money because they did not treat me nicely. One of their sons hit me once. When I decided to leave, they apologized and promised things would be better. When we reached the Philippines Refugee Processing Center, their son cursed and hit me again. Things suddenly changed as soon as we got to this center. They said I could leave or stay with them. They do not need me any more. I am afraid to live with them. I know they will forsake me when we get to the United States. I do not know how my future will be. For now, my conscience would not allow me to break the news that we are not one family. I would like them to

get to America too. My wish, like other Amerasians' wish, is to find my father again. I now ask for your benevolence and kindness to let me go alone. My hope is that the United States government will lessen our suffering and protect us from those who buy and sell the Amerasians like us just because we had no money to pay for all the paperwork. People who promised to treat us nicely before, now have threatened to kill us if we cause any trouble, if we reveal their identities. Please, I beg you to pay more attention to the Amerasians. We will forever remember what you do for us now. We believe in you! Signed on July 10, 1992. Minh.²⁰

Minh's is another story of an Amerasian who has struggled so much to survive in the midst of discrimination, harsh treatment, and prejudices. Love, hope and a will to survive have aided her through many harsh conditions.

Amerasians Struggling with Reality

Many Amerasians have been disillusioned when coming to resettle in America, the homeland of their fathers. They soon realized that the American public or the government did not welcome them as if they are the American special children. No one came to greet them at the airport except the small group of people from the church that sponsored them. Soon they discovered that real life was not as they had thought it would be. They had so many things to face now like paying the rent, getting enough food, getting a license to drive a car, saving enough money to buy a car, finding a job, making some money, and taking ESL classes.

For many of these Amerasians, they have no time to

²⁰ Minh Thi Nguyen, letter to author, 10 July 1992.

think about finding their fathers. Their instinct is survival. However, one Amerasian, Tanisa Terry, found her father, George Terry, in December 1994 after twenty-three years of separation.²¹ Tanisa is a fortunate Amerasian, who searched and found her missing father using her birth certificate and her father's Social Security number. But, for those Amerasians whose mothers burned and destroyed all important papers, like birth certificates and marriage certificates, they have nothing else that would lead them to their American fathers. If they had enough identification and means to find their fathers, how many fathers after more than twenty years would still embrace and welcome their children home? These Amerasians have been abandoned and neglected for so long. Maybe, their fathers' love, acceptance, and welcome may ease some of the pains.

²¹ "GI, Vietnam-born Daughter Reunite," editorial, San Diego Union-Tribune, 24 Dec. 1994, A3.

CHAPTER 4

Pastoral Approach to Understanding
and Working with the AmerasiansEmotional Abuses and Psychological Effects

Amerasians have been abandoned, neglected, exploited, discriminated against, abused, and mistreated all their lives. As a result, that produced many emotional scars and left them to deal with many psychological effects such as low self-esteem, self-hatred, withdrawal, violent behaviors, and uncontrollable tempers.

One of the pains they often have to deal with is the painful feeling of "No one really loves me" or "Why does everybody hate me?" or "Why can't I love and accept myself?" These feelings of being abused, discriminated, and rejected create a group of people with very low self-esteem. Melinda Beck stated that many Amerasians "suffer from chronic low self-esteem."¹ The question of "Why does no one love me?" has imbedded itself in the unconscious mind of the Amerasians, making them reach out more for love. But few have found the love and acceptance they seek.

The feeling of being abandoned by their fathers kept coming back time after time to haunt them.² Questions such as, "Why did my father abandon me and my mother? What was wrong with me? Why didn't he send support or write as he

¹ Beck, 57.

² Beck, 57.

had promised?" were often asked by them.

The confused thoughts of "I am not worthy of anyone's love" and "Everyone has abandoned me" have caused them to fear and to withdraw from other people. The survival mechanism which causes them to be suspicious and not responsive to other people who try to make some contacts with Amerasians, also protects them from being hurt again, and sometimes makes them feel bitter, resentful and angry.

They often hate themselves, other people, and the society that did not treat them with human dignity. The term "han" in Vietnamese is similar to "Han" in the Korean language, which can properly be used to describe the deep feeling of hurt, bitter anger and resentment that the Amerasians have experienced. Hyun Younghak describes Han

as a sense of helplessness in the face of the overwhelming odds, a feeling of total abandonment ("Why hast thou forsaken me?"), a feeling of the acute pain of sorrow in one's guts and bowels, making the whole body writhe and wriggle, an obstinate urge to take revenge and to right the wrong-all these combined.³

For many Amerasians, this "sense of helplessness" has made them become withdrawn, shy, and timid persons. For fear of retaliation, they do not want to challenge authority or those who mistreat them. They feel powerless. They are afraid to approach people. Sometimes, Amerasians just

³ Hyun Younghak, "Three Talks," in Theologia Crucis in Asia: Asian Christian Views on Suffering in the Face of Overwhelming Poverty and Multifaceted Religiosity in Asia, by A. A. Yewangoe, Amsterdam Studies in Theology, vol. 6 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987), 116.

silently accept the fate imposed on them.

In Vietnamese, people often console themselves regarding unfortunate things which happen in life with the phrase, "So da dinh nhu vay roi thi phai chiu vay," which means "fate is already predestined, I had to bear this." Amerasians accept the pains without much fight or struggle. They have given up fighting, because they are taught to accept the fate. Amerasians must claim the strength which resides within themselves. They should not give up the fight for people to treat them with respect and love rather than believe in fate and passively accept whatever happens.

For other Amerasians, "han" is not a suppressed feeling any more, but a feeling of explosive anger which turns to violent means to release some of the pains. The uncontrolled feeling of anger turns them into violent people who use strength or force to make other people fearful of them and to reclaim what they have lost. Many Amerasians who violently hurt others have trouble with the law. Others join gangs to find a place where they can feel they belong. The desire to feel that they belong to someone or to a group of people who can share something in common is critical for Amerasians.

Therefore, many Amerasian clusters or centers must be established to provide Amerasians with this important need of belonging. These clusters and centers can help them see that killing, robbing, stealing, hurting, and seeking

revenge are not positive ways to resolve anger and pain. Anger and painful feelings must be shared and understood. Many Amerasians did not find acceptance, love and belonging. They did not know how to express the "Han" feeling within themselves, and therefore have sought revenge to make things right.

In many of the California prisons, whether in Chino, Pleasant Valley, San Diego or Los Angeles, one can see examples of these persons. Many started out very innocently just to find a place for belonging, but unfortunately the gang members misled, used, and abused them. After staying with the gang for a while, the leader sent them out to do something illegal, and they followed the order. They were seduced, hooked, and controlled by others again.

Many Amerasians join gangs also because they have given up studying. Going to school and studying would take too long. It is boring, discouraging because they lack the capacity to equip themselves to succeed in school. Some also gave up finding work because they were not properly trained to have the skills needed to perform many jobs. For some Amerasians, they were accustomed to the street life in Vietnam, and wanted an easy life. They did not want to live with their accompanying families (those who are not real relatives to Amerasians), for the families often lecture and make fun of them about their lack of skills and of the desire to study instead of encouraging them to prepare for

the future.

Therefore, if "han" is not channeled into doing the right things to correct the wrongs, then it only creates more problems than it tries to solve. To help Amerasians, one needs to take time to listen and help them be in touch with these "han" feelings. When Amerasians feel safe and accepted, they can share with those who seek to understand their pains and sufferings. One also needs to build a community, a network with strong support where Amerasians can find love and acceptance. Then slowly in the process of healing, Amerasians must learn to say to themselves, "We will not tolerate the oppression, mistreatment, prejudice, humiliation, and rejection any more. We must stand up for ourselves in our struggle for justice and equality." Those of us who care should also stand by the Amerasians, advocate on their behalf, and assist them in whichever way we are able to ease the sufferings.

When one can help Amerasians to affirm that decision to stop the spread of pain, one has helped Amerasians take the right actions toward steps of becoming whole again. When "han" is shared with a trusted friend or a counselor or a care giver who helps them express their feelings, healing will slowly take place.

When healing takes place, restoration, not retaliation, will take place. When Amerasians accept the fact that what happened in the past belongs to the past, they will not

dwell on the past or nurse the pains; rather they will find help that enables them to deal with the excruciating pain of discrimination and rejection. Amerasians must learn to ask these questions:

What right actions should I take? Who should I contact to help me deal with the issue? Should I forgive and forget those who offended me and get on with my life? Or should I keep blaming the past for which I had no control? Should I continue to hold grudges and bitterness inside forever and watch them destroy my life?

Positive outcomes will happen when Amerasians decide to deal with the "han" feelings with the help of a care giver or a pastor who can lead them through the healing process.

Caring for the Emotional Needs through Pastoral Care

According to Carroll Wise, pastoral care is "the art of communicating the inner-meaning of the Gospel to persons at the point of their need."⁴ Amerasians indeed need someone who can first love and accept them for who they are, and allow them to be free so that they can share whatever is hidden inside. They need someone who is strong and has good skills and knowledge of how to care for hurting people like them. Amerasians need to know that they are loved and accepted by God for who they are. They need to know that God's grace is available to those who open their hearts and minds to receive it.

To help us better assist Amerasians in their struggles,

⁴ Carroll Wise, The Meaning of Pastoral Care (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 8.

Vien Dao Doan, a Vietnamese Christian medical doctor, makes the following statement: "One needs to know that the Vietnamese people are not taught to seek help from the outsider. They are taught not to share what is supposed to be secrets. They are trained by parents that they must deal with their problem. However, some keep the problem inside until it is too late. The mentality is that it is shameful to admit that you have a problem."⁵

Vien Dao Doan goes on to say,

Even in America, many Vietnamese do not know that they need to go to a counselor or a psychologist to seek help when they have emotional, psychological and family problems. They are also afraid that people would label them as "Dien" or "Mat" or "Khung" which means crazy in Vietnamese, when they tell others what had happened in their lives. They are afraid that things will get worse if they confront the problems. They just keep silent and let time heal the wounds. Some other people often think that all they need to do is to go to a medical doctor when they have a problem. Take some medicine and everything would be solved is used to be the norm.

One also needs to be aware that there was not a counseling clinic set up by the Communist government in Vietnam to provide help and guidance for the Amerasians. There were no resources and funds available to help the emotionally distressed Amerasians. There were no social services offered free of charge to them so that they could get some help.

Politically, government already had too many problems

⁵ Vien Dao Doan, interview with author, 25 Nov. 1995.

dealing with the Amerasians. By sending the Amerasians and their families to the New Economic Zones, the government thought that they had already taken care of the problem. The mentality of the government was, "Who really cares for them? Let the Americans worry about them. That is their problem."

After coming to America, many Amerasians discovered that they were still not emotionally and psychologically mature enough to face the challenges of life. There are too many painful things that they have experienced. Many have not discovered the love and spiritual strength available to them. Not many people have time to listen to their stories. They are the wounded who need healing. They need people who care about and for them.

Many still feel distant about the counseling office. Even with the clinical systems available to help them deal with the psychological traumas, such as the United States Catholic Conference or the St. Anselm Refugee Center which offer free counseling, not many Amerasians seek the professional help they need. They were not trained to seek professional help in that way because going to see a psychologist, a psychiatrist, or a counselor and letting these people know their difficult situations not just means that something is wrong with them; it means that they are "crazy," and they are afraid of what other people will say or gossip about them. Moreover, seeking professional help

often costs them a lot of money which they cannot afford. But unless those who wish to offer help and care make themselves available--inviting Amerasians to share, providing them with a non-threatening atmosphere or setting, and establishing trust--they may not open up and expose their wounds again.

The Healing Process

With much pain and suffering, many Amerasians seek to find some friends who can just listen. Churches are not in a better position than most helping professionals to be helpful to Amerasians. They are just more visible, less formal and traditionally free of charge. Therefore, they can become new homes to Amerasians and their families. Through the help and assistance of the churches, Amerasians can come to God at whatever point they are in life and receive help, forgiveness and power to live vibrantly, loving God and others. To better help themselves, Amerasians need to connect with the divine power of God which has the power to heal the brokenness and alienation that sin has caused. The healing of the brokenness and alienation brings forth forgiveness which is essential to the well-being of Amerasians and all human beings alike.

Through the healing process of pastoral care, the power of God's love will set them free to be who they are meant to be. A pastor or a caregiver who can accept Amerasians without judging them will do a great service toward them.

However, Miller and Jackson state:

You are not asked to approve of or agree with the person, only to accept him or her as a worthwhile human being. You show this acceptance by avoiding the roadblocks and by practicing reflective listening.⁶

Avoiding the roadblocks implies that the pastor or a caregiver will allow the Amerasians to be themselves and to share whatever is in their minds and hearts. The pastor or caregiver should not negate, reject or deny feelings expressed by Amerasians but draw them out by reflective listening. Miller and Jackson also emphasize the importance of attentive listening without judging.

To accept is to give all your attention and energy to the process of understanding what the person means, and to reflect that meaning back to the person accurately. It is being open, allowing the other person to be as he or she really is, without using masks or filters. It is listening without judging.⁷

Through a process of genuine caring, Amerasians can feel free to open up and share their struggles in life. When they feel they can trust the pastor or the caregiver, they are more likely to share their secrets, pains and mistreatment of the past. If trust has not been established first, one cannot get very far in helping these Amerasians. Understanding of the Amerasian situations, where they have come from and how they think, will enhance the pastoral

⁶ William R. Miller and Kathleen A. Jackson, Practical Psychology for Pastors (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1985), 41.

⁷ Miller and Jackson, 41.

caring relationships.

Through pastoral care, the pastor or caregiver can encourage and empower the Amerasians to accept and to love themselves. Through this pastoral care, healing may take place and their self-esteem may be improved. A caregiver may let tears roll down when one feels moved or touched by the harsh and difficult life the person is sharing. It shows them how much the pastor or the caregiver cares, loves and accepts their emotions. It bridges the brokenness and brings the gap closer so the healing process can continue.

Healing continues when a little seed of faith is sown that helps the person to begin seeing hope. There is hope. There is power from above and from within to help Amerasians to live the abundant life and to succeed in America. It is critical to encourage Amerasians to take personal responsibility in the healing process. This personal responsibility includes first taking action to stop the pain, to seek pastoral and professional help whichever way is easier, more comfortable, and affordable for them.

They may no longer need to dwell on the past, but must allow their hearts to experience new freedom to forgive and to love those who offended and caused them great pains. They have to want to change and to be healed. No one can make any changes for Amerasians unless they desire to seek change for the better.

God's power and love are stronger than the pains and

can close up the old wounds. When healing takes place, prejudices do not disappear automatically. It requires Amerasians to continue affirming to themselves that they are loved and accepted by God. They can slowly reach out to others and break down barriers and prejudices. Keeping regular contacts with Amerasians and their family members and affirming them with love, care, and genuine acceptance are very important in the process of healing and growth.

When love and acceptance are shown by the one who gives care, they are more likely to freely respond to God's love. One point to keep in mind is that whatever choices Amerasians make, the pastor or caregiver should respect them. One should continue to give love and care because through them, others will come to know and experience God. Their hearts must be freed to love and to respond to God's grace.

A pastor or a caregiver must commit themselves to bringing Christ to the hurting, the lonely, the downhearted, the lost, and the Amerasians.

James Kellum, a pastor who has worked extensively to assist orphans and Amerasians for many years says: "The pastor is the one who travels on the road, sees the wounded, stops, cleans the wound and takes the wounded person to the inn nearby for further treatment and follow up." A pastor or a caregiver who follows Jesus Christ's footsteps must also walk through Samaria. Jesus crossed Samaria to show us

that we must break down all barriers, prejudices, discrimination and rejection so that healing, acceptance, restoration, and transformation can take place.

When a close friend or a pastor breaks down all the walls and listens attentively, without making judgment or discounting Amerasians' emotional responses, they can reveal their suppressed feelings which have been covered for a long time. When they can freely describe how they feel inside, then discussion about those feelings will proceed naturally and appropriately.

When a person finds a trusted friend like a compassionate pastor or a caregiver, he or she will pour out himself or herself completely. John B. Cobb, Jr., in his book Theology and Pastoral Care, talks about the important relationship between the pastor and the counselee as follows:

The counselor is observing God's working in the counselee, helping to remove some of the barriers to that working, and encouraging the tentative steps toward openness to life, and therefore, to God. Pastors, above all will know that they are, at most, mid-wives of God's grace.⁸

Therefore, pastors and Christian caregivers are the "mid-wives of God's grace." According to Paul C. Holinger, a pastor and a medical doctor, a large number of emotionally distressed people have a tendency to seek their clergy first for help. From his experiences in counseling, Holinger

⁸ John B. Cobb, Jr., Theology and Pastoral Care (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 52.

stresses that the availability of the ministers plays an important role in helping others, because ministers are highly visible in the community. A pastor can make an assessment of a person's situation by obtaining a history of both past and present experiences, evaluating the mental status and assessing specific features in detail, when appropriate. After the assessment has been done, then synthesis is a thorough process of evaluating all data, diagnosing, and determining appropriate treatment. Treatment, then, involves the pastor--who will continue working with the distressed persons--and other professionals working in a collaborative manner. Finally, Holinger stresses that follow-up is always important even after the counseling relationship is terminated.⁹

Many of the Amerasians who have been hurt deeply are often afraid to seek help or to talk to someone because they fear that they will get hurt again. Opening up old wounds is not easy. One or two counseling sessions will not help solve their long-standing problem of suppressed feelings of pain and anger. Amerasians cannot afford long-term counseling because that will cost them too much time, money and energy. However, they need to see the long-term effect on their emotional and psychological maturity if they do not seek help. Many Amerasians do not conceive how a

⁹ Paul C. Holinger, Pastoral Care of Severe Emotional Distress: Principles of Diagnosis and Treatment (New York: Irvington, 1985), 51-65.

psychologist or counselor can help them get rid of their pain. The counseling concept of talking to a professional about one's problems is not easily perceived or trusted yet.

Therefore, many Amerasians are reluctant to come to a psychologist or counselor. It is helpful to realize language barriers do not make it easy for the Amerasians to go to a psychologist or a counselor who cannot speak their language. For many who really need help, they want to seek those who can communicate with them in the same language.

If they must have a translator to speak on their behalf, it must be someone whose characters and skills can be trusted. For many Amerasians, their past experiences with translators at the United States Embassy in Vietnam and in the Philippines were not positive because some of these translators did not interpret exactly what the Amerasians said to the interviewers. The translators, sometimes, mistranslated words, or put statements in their own words which communicated the wrong message.

It is not easy for Amerasians to share their true feelings, because in the past no one bothered to listen, understand and believe them. A pastor or a caregiver must get beyond all the superficial layers and walls which they have built to protect themselves in order to help them. Taking time to listen and to understand and be patient with them is critical.

VanPhi Nguyen, a volunteer who worked with the

Amerasians and the refugees in the Philippines in the summer of 1992, said, "You have to spend a lot of time with them; listen to them. They will tell you everything." Huong, a female Amerasian who came to VanPhi, shared her life story. Huong said, "No one believes what I said is true." VanPhi Nguyen said,

Huong was sexually assaulted by her stepfather, who accompanied her to the United States, while she was in the Philippine Refugee Processing Center. But when she told the authorities including her friends about what happened to her, no one believed her words. Her family members said, "She came on to him." Huong tried hard to explain but felt that the situation was hopeless, that no one would ever listen to her. When she got to America, her family separated. She now lives with her friends.

VanPhi Nguyen, sadly stated, "The deep wound is still there causing Huong pain. She is unable to forget what happened."¹⁰

It is not easy for Huong to find the help she needs to deal with the pains and trauma at the clinical and professional level. Fortunately, she could find some help from her Amerasian friends who introduced her to God and to the Church for help.

Indeed, at many clusters of churches in United States that participate in the Amerasian Refugee Assistance Program sponsored by World Vision, Amerasians have found a place, a home, a friend, a pastor and a caregiver who can share God's grace and love with them and offer them pastoral care and

¹⁰ VanPhi Nguyen, interview with author, 22 Nov. 1995.

counseling.¹¹ Many Amerasians at these locations have found genuine love, understanding and acceptance. God's love is shared with them, and many have found the help they needed.

Unless a pastor or a caregiver makes himself or herself available, no one will come to seek help. By inviting them to feel free to come any time, a pastor can listen to their conflicts and offer help to prevent those conflicts from becoming bigger problems.

Human beings cannot heal the hurt and deep wounds experienced by the Amerasians, but God can. God can use you and I to minister to the Amerasians when we make ourselves available. A pastor or a caregiver who has helped meet the physical and emotional needs of Amerasians can easily introduce them to God. Truly, God can do the impossible things of using people like us to bring hope and healing and wholeness to Amerasians.

Therefore, as pastors and Christian caregivers, we can offer the assurance of God's grace, forgiveness, hope and healing through the power of Jesus Christ. We can help Amerasians like Huong, Chanh, Hoang, Thanh, Anh, Minh and many others to come to know the love of God and forgiveness through Jesus Christ.

It is also very important to help them see that it is not their fault that these discriminations, rejections, and

¹¹ Duc Xuan Nguyen, "List of Organizations and Churches in Partnership with World Vision's Amerasian Refugee Assistance Program," photocopy, Sept. 1991, 1-16.

mistreatments happened. They may need to understand the causes and effects of the evil system of misused freedom, of greed and selfish ambitions. But with genuine love, acceptance, time and energy, a pastor or a caregiver will lead the Amerasians through the process of healing. In the process of healing, Amerasians may come to a new understanding that they no longer need to hold grudges against their fathers; they must guard their hearts and let not bitterness and anger reside within; they must turn the bitterness, anger or resentment into love, forgiveness and acceptance.

Amerasians with God's love and power can learn to forgive the offenders and stop beating themselves against the wall. They can stop blaming themselves, others, and society and accept the challenge ahead and get on with life.

Through the healing process, a pastor or a caregiver must help these Amerasians see that they are God's children whom God loves very much. This realization that God cares, loves, accepts and redeems them is very important in the healing process. Indeed, God will use the pastoral relationship between a pastor or a caregiver and the hurting Amerasians to bring transformation, healing and wholeness.

A biblical story from Luke 8:22-25 can be shared with the hurting Amerasians. It is the story of the disciples who were crossing the Sea of Galilee. The great storm came, and the boat was about to sink. Jesus was sleeping, and the

distressed disciples were about to perish. Out of desperation and fearing for their lives they called to Jesus for help. Jesus then rebuked the storm, "Peace, be still." And it was still.

All of us, Amerasians included, are crossing the sea of life in one way or another. Sometimes we do not know when a storm will hit us. We try to defend and save ourselves from the splashing water and the strong wind. Our strength at times seems exhausted, and we are about to quit fighting. The disciples in this story then called upon Jesus to save them from destruction. The strong will to survive gave them hope and led them to call upon their friend and Master. Jesus answered the disciples and calmed the storm.

Drawing from this short story, we can suggest that God is not sleeping while we are struggling with life's issues. Storms of prejudices, discriminations, rejections and mistreatments may come at times to anybody. The good news is that God is with us in the midst of these storms of life no matter how great they are. The big waves, the strong wind, the shaking of the boat, or the confusion and fear should not cause us to lose hope. God is in the boat of life with us to protect us from perishing. God is ready to save and redeem us when we call upon God's name. It is the Good News, which we can offer to the hurting Amerasians.

Understanding the fact that God loves and cares for us and is with us to lead us through to the other side will

empower us to calm ourselves and not be afraid of the hardships of life. We can not prevent the storms from coming, but we can do something together as the group of disciples, calling on Jesus.

All of us and the Amerasians cannot go back into the past and erase the memory of war or the prejudices of the Communists and of the society. The scars forever will be there as a mark of our existence. But God hears our cries for help and offers peace for our disturbed souls. God will calm the storm. God will heal the "Han," the damaged emotions, mend the brokenness and empower us to get on with life. To allow God's healing to take place, Amerasians must acknowledge the pain, the suffering, and spend adequate time in grief for the lost of loved ones, homeland, and identities. Howard Clinebell states:

Blocked, unfinished grief takes a heavy toll, sapping one's creative juices. The longer the healing is delayed, the more costly the protracted grief is to the person's wholeness.¹²

Therefore, when grief is felt, expressed and worked through with the help of a pastor or caregiver, forgiveness may be achieved; guilt may be released, and healing and reconciliation may begin to take place.

God certainly can change the bitter hearts and make them into something new, sweet and beautiful. The question

¹² Howard Clinebell, Basic Types of Pastoral Care and Counseling: Resources for the Ministry of Healing and Growth, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 219.

left for us to ask is, "Do we believe in our hearts that God can do that for Amerasians and for ourselves?" God's grace and healing are available for Amerasians and all of us. Will Amerasians and all of us accept God's way of healing through the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ on the cross? Or will we continue to deny the hurt, negate the suffering and numb the pain with temporary means such as alcohol, drugs, pleasure, and work? The price has been paid for our reconciliation with God, with ourselves and with others. These steps of reconciliation are interrelated and cannot be separated from each other so that healing may completely bring wholeness to people.

Amerasians Reconciling with God

Donald P. Smith in his book Congregations Alive, shares with us the striking fact of the world's need of reconciliation.

We live in a world of alienation. Forces of contemporary life reinforce our human condition of estrangement from one another, from ourselves, and from God. This makes the message of our reconciliation in Jesus Christ of increasing urgency and promise. In Christ, we are new creatures.¹³

Amerasians reconciling with God is the necessary step in the process of healing. In this step, their hearts and minds must be open and receptive to God's love. Seeds of love have already been sown when Amerasians come to a pastor

¹³ Donald P. Smith, Congregations Alive (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 30.

or a caregiver. Through an encounter with God, faith is planted, and Amerasians realize that God is truly the Source of life and hope.

To reconcile with God is to invite God to come and dwell in their hearts. Having the assurance that God is with them in their troubles and their sufferings, they are now confident to walk in the Spirit of God's love. Believing that God is always with them, listens to them, hears their cries for help and gives deliverance from hurt, resentment and anger that bind them will bring healing, comfort and wholeness. God never abandons nor forsakes nor rejects God's children. Therefore, anyone can come to God and receive the abundant grace to assist them in the hour of need.

The awakening grace of God will help Amerasians realize that God is ready to reconcile with them and restore their wholeness. When their hearts and minds are open receptively to God's grace, Jesus Christ will come in and fill their hearts with love and transform their minds.

God will meet them where they are in their earnest search for God. God will deliver, set the Amerasians free from the bondage of sin, and from things that alienated them from God.

Through this encounter God gives them the identity of

being God's beloved children.¹⁴ God can take all the hurt, anger, bitterness and the suffering and turn them into joy. God will give them peace and rest for their searching souls.

Amerasians can experience God and know God as their Heavenly Parent. Galatians 4:6 says, "Because you are sons and daughters, God has sent the Spirit of the Child of God into our hearts, crying, 'My loving [Father] Parent! Source of my being!' So through God you are no longer a slave, but a daughter or son, and if daughter or son, then an heir."¹⁵

Many Amerasians have come to America hoping to find their biological fathers again. Only a few fortunate ones, found their fathers. Unfortunately, many fathers had married again, had other children and did not want to have anything to do with their Amerasian children. Unable to find their fathers on earth again, many have found their Heavenly Father/Parent. Truly, God is also their Father/Parent. Their houses now have the strong roof that protects them from the sun, the rain and the storm of life. Life takes on new meaning when pain and suffering draw them to God who may satisfy the longing desire in their hearts.

Amerasians Reconciling with Themselves

After reconciling with God, Amerasians need to

¹⁴ Joann Haugerud, The Word for Us: The Gospels of John and Mark, Epistles to the Romans and the Galatians, Restated in Inclusive Language (Seattle: Coalition on Women and Religion, 1977), 1.

¹⁵ Haugerud, 115.

reconcile with themselves. This step is also important in the process of healing and wholeness. For the wounds to heal Amerasians should not deny their pain, anger, and resentment but admit to the fact that they have been hurt. They may come to a new understanding that past events were caused by the sins in human beings' hearts, by the evil of war, and by the unjust system of a corrupt society.

But they need not dwell on that painful past forever and always be reminded by others who try to open again the wounds that may be healing. Therefore, assuring themselves that they are loved by God and have been reconciled with God through the blood of Jesus Christ, they can love and accept themselves as God does.

Truly, God in Christ has redeemed, saved, set their hearts free to love and accept themselves as beloved and worthy persons in God's eyes. To love and to accept themselves then is to accept God's salvation given freely to them. Reconciling with God, making peace with themselves, they will experience God's transforming and healing power in their lives. They can reinvest their lives in the lives of other people by loving and developing new relationships.

Amerasians Reconciling with Others

Reconciliation with others who have offended and caused them pain is harder to do, and it will take a longer time. Some may come to this step faster and easier than others depending on how thoroughly they have dealt with the grief

in their lives. A pastor or a caregiver needs to help the Amerasians to deal with this tough step in life. This step of reconciling with others involves higher risk, because it might open the wounds again.

Reconciliation will not always be easy, but we have to help Amerasians aim for it and work at it. They might see those who have hurt them, or they might not see them at all, but the important step must be made first in their hearts to forgive the persecutors and set them free in God's hands. God will give them the spirit of love and the courage to initiate steps toward reconciliation. However, by reaching out to others and being reconciled with them with God's transforming grace, love and healing power, their healing process can be complete.

When Amerasians allow God's Spirit to transform their hearts and minds, they can forgive their offenders. They can live at peace with themselves and with others. Donald P. Smith's understanding of God's grace, which is available in Jesus Christ, helps Amerasians discover hope and life.

God's grace makes all things new. In Jesus Christ, God accepts us as we are. Having experienced that acceptance, we can accept ourselves as we are....Because we learn to accept ourselves, we can accept others too. They also have human failings, as we do. They also are accepted, as we are. Through grace we discover the deep meaning of our common humanity.¹⁶

When Amerasians see themselves loving, forgiving, accepting

¹⁶ Smith, 47-48.

and reconciling with others, God does indeed live and dwell in their hearts. They have discovered new meanings in life. With God's love residing in their hearts, they now can help those that have been hurt to be at peace with God, at peace with themselves and at peace with others.

Sometimes, if Amerasians still find themselves wanting to live in isolation, in secluded islands of self-pity and hatred, then they need to stop and ask, "Have I experienced God's salvation and forgiveness? Have I let God heal the old pains, transform hate into love and make everything new? Is God's love dwelling in my heart?" God's steadfast love will cast out fears and self-pity, draw them out of depression, isolation, and separation and give them joy to love and live again.

As pastors and caregivers, we have to do what we can to help Amerasians make peace with God, with themselves and with others. Doing that, we have fulfilled God's call in our lives to care, to lead, and to minister to God's children. As a pastor, the author believes that after receiving God's love and forgiveness, no one can still keep resentment, anger, hate or the desire to punish and to revenge others. When Amerasian hearts are filled with love and acceptance of God, God's love and power will begin to transform and recreate them from within. The resentment, anger, hate and revenge should no longer be where love reigns and fosters. Indeed, with God's love and power,

Amerasians can love God with all their hearts, accept themselves and forgive others.

All of us must continue to struggle to fight with Amerasians to stop violence, retaliation, or revenge. We must continue involving others in the process of healing by educating and challenging people to carefully examine their biases and prejudices, shown in words or in deeds.

There are countless other vulnerable Amerasians who are victims of discrimination, alienation, oppression and exploitation, whose voices are not heard. Together with an open mind and a compassionate heart, anyone can embrace Amerasians as his/her brothers and sisters and help them to live and enjoy life like everybody else.

The oppressive system of abuse, discrimination and mistreatment will not be stopped unless we are the people, with a change of heart and mind, to advocate for Amerasians and to educate other people to love, accept and welcome the Amerasians in their midst. With God's help we must work together to ease the suffering and to bring justice to the world.

When we witness the humanity of other Amerasian persons being violated, we must speak out and come together to support our brothers and sisters in their struggles for justice, freedom, life and happiness.

To love and to empower the Amerasians to be who they are meant to be and to reach their potentials requires the

genuine love of God dwelling in our hearts and flowing through us. Only through God's love and amazing grace can Amerasians experience a new transformation inside their hearts and minds.

CHAPTER 5

Theological Approach to Understanding the Amerasians

Amerasians Are Also Created in God's Image

According to Genesis 1:27, "God created humankind in [God's] his image, in the image of God [God] created them; male and female, [God] created them."¹ This is a basic biblical understanding about God and about the value of human beings. This is the foundation for the ministry of care and service to the hurting Amerasians. In the image of God, human beings are created equal with all the beauty and likeness of God, with God-given rights and human dignity. Created in God's image means that no one should treat another person unfairly, based on race or color. Created in God's image also means that together we can reflect God's love, beauty and glory in our lives.

According to Ricardo Planas, "God calls us to freedom, and gives us a special dignity by making us in his image."² Kosuke Koyama agrees:

Yes, God is a mystery and so is the [human beings] who were created in the image of God. The image of God? Yes! This is the striking way the Bible expresses human being's character. Here is the core of human's puzzling depth. [Humankind] is endowed by the Creator with unique gifts and ability which function in [their] life as the

¹ Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy, eds., The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha, New Revised Standard Version (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991), 3.

² Ricardo Planas, Liberation Theology: The Political Expression of Religion (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1986), 213.

image of God."³

Koyama also points out that human beings can misuse freedom and have the ability to choose to do good or evil. Freedom to choose self-interests over the interests of others usually is the root of the problem of evil. Genuine care for self-interest itself is good. But when self-interests destroy other people's lives in the process, we must take a proactive effort to stop the evil from spreading.

Therefore, we are accountable before God every time we exercise the divine gift of freedom. With that freedom, normally human beings have chosen to lust for power, control and domination rather than to empower, to respect and to strengthen. This lust for power and control has caused people to go to wars instead of to live in peace. Wars have destroyed many people's lives and caused people to suffer unnecessarily.

The Vietnam War has left permanent scars in the lives of many Vietnamese, especially the Amerasians. The Communists, after liberating South Vietnam, chose to punish their enemy, the former officers and the Amerasian children, rather than to forgive and to treat them right with human dignity.

The United States government chose to break its promise of defending a small nation and withdrew completely,

³ Kosuke Koyama, Waterbuffalo Theology (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1974), 206.

abandoning South Vietnam to defend herself. Because of politics, governments chose to let these Amerasians suffer for many years before rushing to their rescue. Many Amerasian fathers chose to end the relationships and left their loved ones behind.

The society at large chose to uphold its tradition of a "pure race" and decided to discriminate and showed prejudices against these abandoned Amerasians. People used their freedom to disregard these Amerasians and treat them as dust rather than to love, accept, and welcome them. Many children in school had chosen to harass, to mistreat their Amerasian peers, denying them a chance to get an education. Therefore, we all bear some responsibility in causing the pain and suffering in other people's lives.

As a whole, we all have misused our freedom in one way or another. There is always pain and suffering when we misuse our freedom and power. By choosing to go after our own interests instead of other people's interests, we no longer reflect the love of God in our hearts. The sin of lust for power and control and the sin of greed and selfishness have caused alienation, discrimination and oppression in many of the lives of the Amerasians.

Therefore, in order to bring people back to God and to restore God's image of beauty and glory, Jesus Christ came, lived to show us the way, died and was resurrected again to give human beings the power to use our freedom to bring love

and justice to all humankind. Kathleen Greider reminds pastors and caregivers that one of their roles is "To assist Amerasians who themselves desire to live closer to God."⁴ God's love, beauty and glory will reflect in their lives as they draw closer to God.

Amerasians Becoming New Creations in Christ

When an opportunity comes for the author to share with the hurting Amerasians, the Bible verse from 2 Corinthians 5:17 is often quoted to offer God's hope and new life to them: "So, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"⁵

Truly, in Jesus Christ, Amerasians can experience salvation and liberation. They can become God's new creations. God's image in the Amerasians is restored again in Christ. When Amerasians accept Christ's offer of salvation, they experience love and joy in their hearts. The pain, suffering and brokenness are mended and healed. They are indeed God's new creations, new persons with all their human dignity restored.

Becoming a new creation in Christ does not exempt Amerasians from going through emotional difficulties.

⁴ Kathleen Greider is Assistant Professor of Pastoral Care and Counseling at the School of Theology at Claremont. The reminder is from a note to the author on 16 Dec. 1995.

⁵ Victor Roland Gold et al., eds., The New Testament and Psalms: An Inclusive Version (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), 277.

Becoming a new creation in Christ does not necessarily mean that God will instantly wipe away all the emotional scars and Amerasians will no longer struggle. However, this new status in Christ means that from now on, healing power is available; forgiveness is accessible; guilt and hatred are cast away; love is bountifully given; grace is present and sufficient; joy is found and transformation begins to take place.

There is hope and new life in Christ. There is God's power, always available to Amerasians, to live the meaningful and abundant life here on earth.

Amerasians' New Status in Christ

Helping Amerasians to understand their new status in Christ and to celebrate that is very important in their process of recovery. The Bible verses in Galatians 3:26-28 are often used to help Amerasians celebrate their new status with other believers. "For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith....There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer enslaved or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."⁶

This is a beautiful passage for the new Christians and Amerasians to memorize which helps to remind them that in Christ we have a common ground for all human relationships. The new status in Christ allows Amerasians the freedom to

⁶ Gold et al., 289.

love, accept and treat others as equals. When Amerasians and all human beings have God's love and Jesus Christ in their hearts, discrimination and separation based on race and color eventually disappear. Many people may have claimed that they are Christians; they belong to this church or that church; they may have quoted the Bible, verse by verse, and have claimed and believed the authority and inerrancy of God's Word. But their lives, words and deeds may not have shown genuine love for God and for others. By looking at the fruits, we may come to know the trees. Many may have heard the cry of the needy, the oppressed, the poor and the Amerasians, but have chosen not to respond in love and kindness, in action.

But at the same time, we have to admit that as human beings, and as Christians, we are still coming up short in many areas of our lives in our walking humbly before God, in our showing kindness toward others, and in our doing justice for others. God is still in the process of making and remaking people, breaking down walls and ministering to the hurt and broken people. Therefore, to become new believers in Christ, Amerasians and all of us are becoming new people who will learn to follow Christ's footsteps in showing God's love, in healing the hurt and bringing the reign of God to all people.

Together with God's love abiding in our hearts, we can eliminate the thoughts of maintaining an inferior or

superior race. In Christ, Amerasians become one body with other believers. The unity and equality of all believers is achieved in Christ. The feeling of being small and insignificant in other people's sight can be replaced with the new genuine feeling of being worthy and significant in God's sight and others.

All human beings must depend on each other and depend on God's grace every day to treat others equally, no matter how great or small they are. Together, Amerasians and Vietnamese and all those who love God are indeed one in Christ, working together for the good of all humanity.

Amerasians in Their New Faith Journeys

Many Amerasians, refugees, and family members come to know the love of God and experience God in a new way that they did not know before. They begin to see themselves as God sees them. As they begin their faith journeys, many difficult questions about God, God's salvation, and the ways God works in the world have arisen. Asking questions about God, they in fact are doing theology.

Their context is the context of Amerasian persons who have been suffering many hardships in life. They have been abandoned in the past. They have lost track of their identity. They are not pure Vietnamese because they look different. They are not Americans because they were born and raised in Vietnam and speak Vietnamese. They are the Amerasians. They do not know where their fathers are.

They are being abandoned again to struggle on their own after the government cut welfare assistance. They are trying to understand more about God and how God works. For these Amerasians, it is troublesome to struggle and figure out how God can allow such sufferings and hardships in life. Wesley S. Woo's definition of theology is helpful for our understanding of God. Theology is

the reflection about the nature of God, God's relationship to all of creation, and our response to God. It is also the attempt to understand and practice faith and discipleship in accordance with God's desire and will for God's creation.⁷

When Amerasians begin to ask questions, to search for the truth and to find some answers in helping them understand more about life, about their experiences, they are doing theology. It is a fact that our human efforts of trying to understand God or the suffering in the world will always continue and never stop. Searching, knowing and understanding God will always be the mystery. But what we can offer to Amerasians and those who are in the midst of suffering is a hope in the God who loves them so much.

The Loving God

When the author approaches the Amerasians and those who are hurting, the Bible verse John 3:16 is always used to share with them and to comfort them. "For God so loved the

⁷ Wesley S. Woo, "Theological Dimensions," in Asian Pacific American Youth Ministry: Planning, Helps, and Program, ed. Donald Ng (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1988), 11.

world that God gave God's only Child, so that everyone who believes in that Child may not perish but may have eternal life."⁸

"God is love," the Bible declares. They begin to understand that God's love is ever present, loving and embracing this world. God has sent God's Child into the world so that everyone, Amerasians included, who believes in that Child may not perish but may have eternal life. How comforting to know that God also loves them. But, God also gives all human beings the freedom to choose to put their trust in God and to receive God's gift of life.

They begin to understand that the choices that other people make every day affect the lives of others. Choices made in self-interests are rooted in sin. Sin has produced disobedience, rebellion, greed, selfishness, hatred, and anger, which result in broken relationships in the world. Sin has entered humanity through the disobedience of humankind. Sin has caused suffering and death. Sin has destroyed relationships between God and humanity.

Growing in faith, they know God wants God's children to love one another, to respect one another, and to care for one another, instead of putting persons down or treating them as if they are inferior or second-class citizens.

Many times in our self-interests we choose to hurt others. We choose to lift ourselves up and put others down.

⁸ Gold et al., 146.

We have used war to exploit and to afflict people with oppression. We have used power to dominate and control people's lives. Our choices have caused excruciating pains.

The Hard Questions

But "Why did God allow the suffering in my life?" is the question many human beings ask at least once in their lives. But a question like this from Amerasians, searching for some purpose or explanation of the suffering that is causing great pain, is not easy to answer. "Where is God when I am feeling hurt by people's rejection?" asked one Amerasian. "Why is my life like this?" Eugenia Price states:

The scope of human suffering is so wide it would be impossible ever to show in detail how God acts in our behalf in each particular kind of suffering. But in all, [God] acts always on one basic principle-identification with us in the suffering. Jesus Christ Himself is the Supreme Sufferer. In all our pain, we find God's way through it, if we allow Christ to meet us in it.⁹

God does not cause us to suffer so that we will moan and groan, complain and curse God. God does not bring suffering to human beings so that God can enjoy seeing us suffer. It may be true, but it may not be pastoral when someone quickly says to suffering Amerasians and others with conclusive statements as if they come straight from God: "God is teaching you something. That is why you are experiencing pain and suffering all your life. There are hidden sins in

⁹ Eugenia Price, What Is God Like? (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1960), 96.

your life. There are lacks of faith." However, it might not be true that suffering is a sign indicating that Amerasians have sinned against God. It might be the sins of the people, you and I, the society, and the world that cause suffering in other people's lives.

In the midst of our searching for answers, God's presence and promises of hope and deliverance are always near. But why can we not feel and experience God's presence, and see God's hope? What is blocking our vision from seeing some hope and finding some answers? Are we lacking faith? Are we living in sin? Or are we merely the victims of other people's sins? Whatever the causes that stop us from experiencing God's presence, having the answer we are looking for, we must continue to put our trust in a loving God who is faithful, merciful and kind. God's purpose in allowing pain and suffering to come our way, sometimes, remains "a mystery."¹⁰

We cannot grasp, comprehend or rationalize when pain and suffering go beyond the capacity of common sense and limited knowledge. Hao Nguyen, who has been struggling recently with some intense pain in her life, shares her experience in the search for some answer from God. She said, "When God is silent, we must keep on knocking, praying, knocking and waiting again until God answers us.

¹⁰ James Dobson, When God Doesn't Make Sense (Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House, 1993), 5.

Do not give up hope in God for God is faithful even though we might be faithless."¹¹ We do not know how long suffering will last or how long it will take before God breaks the silence. Billy Graham said, "We cannot avoid suffering, but we can determine our response to it."¹² Therefore, knowing and trusting God who loves and identifies with us in our suffering may assure a hope which will bring new light and understanding to our suffering. Trusting in the love and goodness of God, we can cope with difficult situations of life and become believers through faith.

God's Love, Our Hope

Choan-Seng Song reveals the impact of our human suffering upon God.

Suffering touches the heart of God as well as the hearts of human beings. In the suffering of humanity, we see and experience the suffering of God. God and human beings are bound together in suffering.¹³

It is easy for Amerasians to feel pity for themselves and dwell in their suffering. But, knowing that God is more concerned about their suffering and wanting them to bring all the pains and sufferings to God, their souls can find rest. Insight into suffering comes when they see that God

¹¹ Hao Nguyen, interview with author, 5 Apr. 1996.

¹² Billy Graham, Hope for the Troubled Heart (Minneapolis: Grason, 1991), 15.

¹³ Choan-Seng Song, Third-Eye Theology: Theology in Formation in Asian Settings (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1979), 101.

is determined to redeem them from hopeless suffering by suffering with them in Jesus Christ. Choan-Seng Song shares his perspective on suffering which produces hope.

[Humanity] suffers, and [humanity] hopes, and hope makes suffering possible and tolerable. We are destined to suffer in hope. Suffering, divorced from hope can be self-destructive, masochistic and therefore demonic. Hope which seeks to by-pass suffering is unreal, un-human.¹⁴

Amerasians and all human beings may have hope when they begin to know and accept that God is in control; God is still at work in their lives; God loves and cares for each individual as God's son and daughter. Commenting on the "why" questions, Choan-Seng Song eases the wondering mind of the Amerasian seeker who tries to find some answer for the suffering with a new insight.

But for the suffering which touches the depth of human spirit, there is no answer to the question why. Job asked why he had to suffer. The more he asked, the more angry and confused he became. In the end he had to give up asking. And the moment he stopped asking why, he found himself embraced in the loving bosom of God.¹⁵

It is true that when we all stop reasoning, searching, and asking why, God may intervene and provide us with the most profound answer. But, what do Amerasians do while the end of the tunnel is still dark, while the suffering is so severe, and while the pain is intensified? What do they do

¹⁴ Choan-Seng Song, "Asia in Suffering and Hope," in Asian Theological Reflections on Suffering and Hope, ed. Yap Kim Hao, Asia Focus (Singapore: Christian Conference of Asia, 1977), 50.

¹⁵ Song, "Asia in Suffering and Hope," 58.

with that silent period when God is completely silent, which can be compared to the darkest night of the soul?

Amerasians have fought for a long time to survive the pains and the anguish when their troubled hearts would not rest. They struggle with life, trying to find answers to the question "Where is God when it hurts?"¹⁶

While continuing to struggle with life's excruciating pain and heartaches and bearing the silence of God, Amerasians must continue to hope, to pray and to search for answer. Realizing that we, the finite human beings will never fathom the infinite mind of God, we may leave unanswered question aside. Choan-Seng Song responds that "there is no universal answer to the universal quest into the depth of God's silence. All of us must find an answer for ourselves in our own particular context."¹⁷

When we calm ourselves down, we can begin to hear God's whisper, "I am with you always." Indeed, God did intervene and brought Amerasians out of Vietnam and out of their hopeless situations. God offers them hope to start new lives again. Looking back, Amerasians can thank God for the strength to endure such pain and anguish. God is still at work in Amerasians' lives and is weaving all the circumstances with strands of hope and beauty.

¹⁶ Philip Yancey, Where Is God When It Hurts?, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1977), 9.

¹⁷ Song, Third-Eye Theology, 8.

Charles Ohlrich ascertains the hope we have in God, the Comforter.

When the shadow of suffering falls over our lives, overwhelming us and causing us to lose all perspective, the Comforter comes to us to remind us that there is light....¹⁸

Ohlrich, beautifully, indicates the meaning of the suffering of Christ, when he says, "God suffers for [humankind] to save; [God] suffers with [humankind] to strengthen and comfort."¹⁹

Amerasians and all people who are suffering can begin to see God's Light, Jesus Christ, the Light that shines in darkness.²⁰ When experiencing the darkest night of the soul, Amerasians can depend on God's Light to lead them out of despair and hopelessness to having confidence and complete trust in God.

Jesus Christ, the Light of the world, has come to bring God's gift of salvation to humanity. God in Christ has come into the world, walked and lived among human beings, suffered and died on the cross to offer God's salvation.

God's salvation is a free gift to be accepted or rejected. God does not force human beings to love God and accept God's way of salvation. God is patient and inviting

¹⁸ Charles Ohlrich, The Suffering God: Hope and Comfort for Those Who Hurt (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1982), 85.

¹⁹ Ohlrich, 88.

²⁰ Metzger and Murphy, 125 (John 1:5).

and allows humankind to exercise personal freedom to choose to accept or reject God's Light of hope.

God in Christ, stretching out God's hands, shows all humankind how much God loves them. The cross has become the symbol of God's suffering love reaching out to all humankind for centuries. The questions left to be asked then are: Can Amerasians accept God's love and healing power for their deep wounds, or are they continuing to blame God for what has happened? Eugenia Price helps the Amerasians and all of us see the struggle God has to face in dealing with our pains:

[God] cannot merely shove us out of the way of pain. [God] would be a fiend if [God] pampered us in that way.²¹

Therefore, when suffering causes so much pain, Amerasians (and all of us) can run toward God and be reaffirmed in God's love, have hope and receive God's power to overcome. Amerasians and all of us have to remind ourselves to go back to Calvary where Jesus Christ suffered and died on the cross to provide the foundation on which we can build a ministry of hope, healing and reconciliation.

C. S. Lewis shares his perspective on suffering.

I am not convinced that suffering....has any natural tendency to produce such evils (anger and cynicism)....I have seen great beauty of spirit in some who were great sufferers. I have seen men, for the most part, grow better not worse with advancing years, and I have seen the last illness produce treasures of fortitude and meekness from

²¹ Price, 93.

most unpromising subjects.²²

Indeed, God does not authorize suffering, but suffering may bring forth the beauty of God within our lives and the lives of Amerasians. God may use the difficult situations to make us stronger in love and faith and to build character. God may use Amerasians' experiences to strengthen others.

God's Light, Our Guide

Amerasians may not stop the sins and the evil systems that bring war, destruction, oppression, hurt and painful suffering in their lives; but they can stop feeling sorry for what happened and allow those wounds to be healed by the power of God's love.

With God's Light as our Guide, we can always look ahead toward a brighter future. God's promise always to be with us until the end, even in the midst of suffering, makes anything bearable. God never forsakes us or leaves us to endure suffering alone. God is with us always, to give us strength, hope and to be the Light at the end of our tunnels.

Jesus, God's Light, shows Amerasians and all of us that there is something we can do together in the midst of suffering. It is to denounce the evil things done to us and not accept it as our fault.

José Comblin reminds us that

²² C. S. Lewis, The Problem of Pain (New York: Macmillan Company, 1963), 108.

when faced with such circumstances, [we] should denounce to God the injustices afflicting [us].²³

Together, we can denounce the injustices and put a stop to the evil things which have destroyed people's lives.

Amerasians and the Reconciling Community

In the process of enduring the pain and the suffering, denouncing the injustices and stopping the evil things, Amerasians must not let their pains cause them to hate the people who have caused them unnecessary pains. God in Christ must transform biased perspectives into proper understanding, which helps us see that justice belongs to God who alone can make the final judgment.

Together as one, in Christ, Amerasians and the Vietnamese community can make new changes and bring new hope and understanding that break down walls of separation, of biases, and prejudices. Amerasians and all of us can be God's agents of healing, bringing new understandings about one another's backgrounds and circumstances to society at large, and re-educating people to reach out and accept Amerasians as they would want to be accepted--to love them as they would want to be loved.

Dialogue as a Tool for Reconciling

Together, Amerasians and caring people can form a reconciling community that reaches out and initiates

²³ Jose Comblin, Cry of the Oppressed, Cry of Jesus: Meditations of Scripture and Contemporary Struggle, trans. Robert Barr (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988), 30.

dialogue. Through open dialogue in a non-threatening atmosphere, reflective listening can happen. Understanding and acceptance may be born. Love and acceptance can replace biases, prejudices and rejection. Through dialogue, the Amerasians, the Vietnamese people, the American people, can discover that they are all God's children who were lost yet found.

Dialogue can prepare the hearts ready to take risks, to share the hurt, the pain of misunderstanding in the safe atmosphere of trust and confidence. With God's help, we can change our old prejudices into new acceptances. Life is ever changing. But, the old concept of one superior group dominating an inferior group must be replaced. Amerasians and all of us must learn to trust, love, respect and accept each other as God has accepted us.

God's love will be the focal point which draws people together to dialogue. God's love demonstrated through the life and ministry of Jesus Christ becomes the common ground where friends and foes can engage in the process of dialogue toward healing.

The good news for all Amerasians and all humankind is, in God "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer enslaved or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."²⁴

With our hope, trusting in God, the abandoned and

²⁴ Gold et al., 289-90.

oppressed Amerasians and the alienated of society can overcome all the barriers, all the differences that separate and alienate them from each other. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream has given the Amerasians and all of us a confident hope,

that one day....with this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountains of despair the stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together...to stand up for freedom together, knowing we will be free one day.²⁵

Indeed, one day, Amerasians, their fathers, mothers, family members, the Vietnamese and the American communities can come to the same table of God's feast and celebrate their unique stories. There are always hope, love and grace available in God, the Source of Life and in Christ, our Redeemer. One day, we will all be reunited with our loved ones; abandoned and alienated children will come home and live in harmony and in love.

²⁵ Coretta Scott King, My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), 239-40.

CHAPTER 6

Empowering the Amerasians through Pastoral Care
and Practical MinistriesSponsoring Programs and Resettlement

Before the Homecoming Act was passed in 1987 by Congress, only a small number of Amerasians were allowed to enter the United States through the Orderly Departure Program (ODP). Amerasians who were able to leave the country orderly with their parents before the fall of Saigon are considered the fortunate ones because they did not have to go through the pain and suffering that other Amerasians do. In 1982, seven years after the fall of Saigon, there was a first group of eleven Amerasians allowed to leave Vietnam to join their fathers in the U.S.¹

Christopher Whipple said in the August 1985 issue of Life that "Since 1982 some 2,800 of the estimated 20,000 Amerasians have been resettled in the U.S."² According to State Department statistics, there were about 3,200 Amerasians and 4,500 family members that had reached the U.S.³ But, after the Homecoming Act was passed and enacted in 1988, thousands and thousands of Amerasians were allowed to come to America through sponsorships by government, churches, organizations, and private families.

¹ LeMoyne and Mydans, 78.

² Whipple, 98.

³ Cerquone, 240.

According to a statistic from World Vision, Amerasians and family members that departed from Vietnam reached a total of 65,798. The following are fiscal year numbers of Amerasians and their family members resettled in the United States:⁴

1988	3,737
1989	13,505
1990	18,062
1991	17,734
1992 (Oct.-June)	12,766

This was a wonderful opportunity for the American government to make up for its failure in the Vietnam War and to welcome home the children of its own. Many agencies, organizations and churches became sponsors of the Amerasians.

Church organizations like the United States Catholic Conference (USCC), Church World Service (CWS), the International Rescue Committee (IRC), and World Relief (WR) have been helping to finish all the paperwork and legal requirements for Amerasians to come and settle in their fathers' land. St. Anselm Refugee Assistance Center, located in Garden Grove, California, is one of the cluster sites which provided initial support for many Amerasians. World Vision began its Amerasian Refugee Assistance Program in 1988, which works closely with many churches, to help settle these Amerasians and their accompanied families.⁵

⁴ Duc Xuan Nguyen, "Annual Report: Amerasian Refugee Assistance Program," 2.

⁵ Duc Xuan Nguyen, 2.

The late Reverend Hai Nam Nguyen, who in the past had sponsored many Amerasian and refugee families, helped settle the Amerasian and refugee families near his church in Garden Grove. By settling them near his church, Reverend Nguyen said, "You can better care for them." His strong effort in helping them incorporate into the church's life was a long process.

In an interview with Reverend Hai Nguyen on February 11, 1993, the author asked about his experience in working with and helping the Amerasians. This was what he strongly emphasized:

The Amerasians have been beaten up, pushed down by the society that gave them no chance, no opportunity to be themselves. Beside, helping them settle down, providing them the material needs, you must help them come to know the love of God. They can have everything that this world offers, but the deep problem of hurt and pain and anger will always remain. What they need most is love and acceptance and above all, the forgiveness of Jesus Christ. Christ's love and his free gift of salvation will heal the wounds, set them free to love themselves and those that hurt them in the past. God's love will lift them up. You must lift them up by genuinely praising them and upholding them in your prayer. They need to have Jesus Christ in their hearts, so that they can have that power to forgive those that hurt them. You must love them genuinely. They have to see God's love in you, through how you treat them. Find things that they can do, for them to do, to make them feel useful. You have to teach your congregation to love them, through involving in the caring ministry. If you do not love them, who will?⁶

His questions are left for you and me to answer. Will

⁶ Hai Nam Nguyen, interview with author, 11 Feb. 1993.

we take on the challenge of God's calling to reach out and bring them into the church and give them the love and hope they need? Or will we let them run loose on streets, join gangs and then pray for God to deliver them from bad company?

The necessary actions must be taken now before it is too late. Society cannot afford to treat them unfairly any longer. The government must not abandon them again after bringing them into this country. They are our children.

The small world in which we live has become a multi-cultural world with many languages, many colors, and many cultures. Therefore, Amerasians should not be treated any longer as inferior. We all must respect their God-given human dignity. We must allow love to be the basis that draws everyone to work for the common good of humankind and to make this world a better place to live. Wherever we are, we must look around and see the Amerasians, the special group of people God put in our midst for whom we are to care.

For those who want to start a caring ministry for Amerasians in the beginning stages of their resettlement, the simple process can be summarized in seven steps:

1. Encouraging them in their new life in America.
2. Helping them in their difficult times.
3. Answering any questions they might have.
4. Guiding them in their new life.
5. Helping them to adjust to the new community.
6. Helping them understand the Christian faith and involving them, when possible, in the activity of the church.

7. Showing them the Christian lifestyle.⁷

Working Model and Stages of Resettlement

Below is a simple working model developed by Bau Dang, adapted, expanded and carried out by ministry's teams to assist Vietnamese Amerasians and refugees in San Diego. These specific programs and services designed to fit at Wesley United Methodist Church may be adapted to use in other settings. The author hopes to present this working model as a guide for someone who is interested in starting a new ministry to Amerasians.

Under the pastoral leadership of Reverend Bau Dang, the Vietnamese Congregation of Wesley United Methodist Church in San Diego has developed and become one of the outstanding churches that provides tremendous support to help resettle many Amerasians and refugee families. The church has been sponsoring many Amerasian families and other refugees since 1988. Reverend Dang has seen the needs of the Amerasians, of the refugees, and of those who emigrated under the Orderly Departure Program, and committed time, energy, and resources to meet those challenges.

Therefore, the first thing one needs to do is to open one's eyes and see where the needs are or to search one's heart to find the burden which God puts in one's heart to carry through. When one knows God's specific calling and

⁷ Duc Xuan Nguyen, "Annual Report: Amerasian Refugee Assistance Program," 6.

has a burden to reach out to Amerasians, one will need to define the purpose, set the goals, design a plan and implement the programs to reach those goals. One will need to form a team or many teams of volunteers dedicated to serving Amerasians, refugees, family members and other people in the process.

At first, Reverend Dang did not know how he was going to find all the resources needed to help these Amerasians and the refugees when they came. But with faith, trusting in God, Reverend Dang's church has welcomed all the families they sponsored when they arrived at the Lindberg Airport in San Diego. Reverend Dang has organized many teams and groups of volunteers who form a dynamic caring ministry to minister to many Amerasians, refugees and immigrants.

The Newcomers Greeting Team

One needs to form a "Welcoming Committee." Reverend Dang created a volunteer group called the "Newcomers Greeting Team" that specializes in making people feel warm and welcome. What a relief for these Amerasians and the refugees to know that the pastors and other people are present to greet and welcome them.

Many worries and fears they may have felt while sitting on the airplane seemed to disappear when they know that they are not being abandoned. They have just found someone new, who could shed a tear of joy welcoming them. Many people have volunteered a lot of time and energy to go and welcome

these people "fresh off the boat."

Greeting the newcomers at the airport and making them feel welcome is a caring ministry that these volunteer people can do together so well. Amerasians and refugees are greeted alike.

Pictures can be taken at the airport when the new arrivals come so that they can keep and treasure their first moment in this new country or send some back to share with their family members in Vietnam. Many people treasure these first pictures taken because that will remind them that they were not being abandoned when they first arrived here.

Cultural Orientation

One needs to understand the Amerasians and the refugees situations and their mindsets in order to prepare an adequate and thoroughly orientation which will provide sufficiently needed information to these newcomers. After the newcomers arrive at the airport, they are driven to the church or the office for some cultural orientation. It is important to keep the family together. Though they are still tired from the long trip, they feel like a big burden had been lifted from their shoulders. During the orientation, the pastors usually emphasize to the Amerasians and the new arrivals that "You are in good hands. We treat everybody the same, with all of our love and willingness to help you settle down. While you settle down, you can also reach out and help others." It is important to emphasize

the quality of treatment. This good treatment of caring should not have any string attached to it. It means that we are treating people well because we love them; because it is a ministry and not a service where we would receive money from them.

Knowing their concerns about food and shelter, Reverend Dang often says, "Do not worry, we have arranged a place for you to stay today. Rest a little bit, take a shower to freshen yourself and have a hot meal that has been prepared for you and your family. We are doing this token of love because God loves you, and so do we."⁸ How comforting it is to feel such love, warm welcome, and good care. Furthermore, Dang says, "The church will do our best to make sure that you are in a good, safe and friendly environment, near the church and near other Christians."

One needs to find a good and safe place for them to live, preferably in a neighborhood with those who can speak the same language. Settling the newcomers near the church or the sponsors is very good because these refugees and Amerasians can get the help they need quickly. The closer the proximity to the church, the more contacts can be made, which makes the new relationships with these refugees and Amerasian families stronger. The pastors encourage those immigrants who arrived earlier to help the new arrivals with turning on the electricity, gas meter, and telephone line.

⁸ Bau Ngoc Dang, interview with author, 29 Jan. 1993.

Fortunately, in San Diego, California, these services provide access to those who can not speak English. There are Vietnamese representatives who can help serve the new arrivals. These services in people's native language is very necessary to help ease unnecessary frustrations.

One must also understand the mindset of newcomers who are in the mode of saving money, which means the whole family prefers to stay under one roof. Sensitive to their needs, Reverend Dang says, "We will help you rent an apartment according to the size of your family and the money that you just received from the government agency and to the standard required by law." Many apartment owners and landlords are willing to work with the church to help the new arrivals. Because of the trust that the church has been building with these landlords, these new arrivals pass the normal credit check and are able to move into their homes right away.

The Furniture Moving Team

One needs to prepare to meet the physical and material needs of the newcomers. Newcomers may not need to have everything new as long as it is still usable, clean and safe. To better meet the demanding needs of these newcomers, the church has rented a small garage to store used furniture and mattresses which still look very good and sturdy. The furniture moving team includes many young people who volunteer their time and energy to carry heavy

tables, chairs, sofas, mattresses, lamps and such to the family as soon as they move in on their first day.

An important reminder to help these Amerasians, refugees, and family members is repeated by Reverend Dang many times: "Not all of these given to you are brand new. They are still good and usable. They are donations. Use them until you are settled down; you can then donate them to the church or give them away."

Many Amerasians and refugees used to think that the government, their fathers, and the church had already prepared for them big and beautiful houses, nice cars, and money deposited in banks ready to be used. They soon discover reality is not what they thought. To help them deal with this reality, volunteers invite one or more persons in these families to go to pick up donations. They begin to see how hard these volunteers have to work to help them settle. They become appreciative people.

This team of volunteers also works closely with the church office and the newcomers to go pick up donations from the community. These young people work hard to make sure that the family has mattresses to sleep on. They give genuine care and become new friends to the new family.

The pastors can work well with this group of young volunteers and motivate them to find out any special needs of the Amerasians and their families. The pastors then will coordinate people to minister to those needs as soon as they

are able. The volunteers have become the good ears and eyes that minister effectively to the newcomers. They are keys bringing success to the caring ministry of the church as a whole.

The Visitation Team

One must make efforts to visit newcomers as often as one can in order to meet their needs. It might just be an answer to where the grocery or the post office is, or it might be some new concerns, or fears regarding their new places. They might not know how to turn on the oven, the burners, or the showerhead. They might not know how to lock the door, to open and close the blinds. They might need to know how the smoke detector works and how to get out in case of a fire. They might dress funny in their best clothes which may look to the sponsors, like nightgowns or pajamas. Therefore, these newcomers need the sponsors to answer their questions without making them feel embarrassed or look stupid. They need cultural orientation.

That is why the pastors, the sponsors or the visitation team must make the initial visit with new families as soon as they arrive in their new homes. They help the pastor provide extra care and emotional support. New friendships begin to form, and these new refugees feel welcomed, loved and accepted. The visitation team members also help their pastors with follow-up care. Because the newcomers have many questions that they do not have time to ask in the

beginning, this team of caring people will draw those questions out and answer them as they are able. Initial needs are met such as providing blankets, pillows, sheets, utensils, gallons of clean and fresh drinking water, toys for little children. They are also given a church directory with its office telephone numbers and other information which helps them feel connected, knowing that they have a bigger family to support them. Some eager persons ask for directions to the nearest post office so they can buy stamps and send letters back to Vietnam to share what has happened. Church members also help take them to a market to buy groceries.

Many people feel lonely the first few weeks, because they just left everything behind to start life again. They need to establish new relationships with other people. The visitation team is important because it can introduce them to new friends and incorporate them into the church life. More new friends are made as they gradually adjust to the new environment and surrounding area.

To effectively meet the needs of each age level, the pastors have trained the youth to care for the youth and the adults to care for the adults. The church members initiate contacts and invite them to participate in small support groups. Soon after arriving, these new people discover that they are not alone any more, and there is a loving and caring community which embraces them as part of its own.

There are people with whom they can talk. They aim to listen and meet the newcomers' social and emotional needs.

Health Screening and Immunization

It is the responsibility of the sponsors to make sure that Amerasians and refugees complete the health screening and immunization process. To ensure that the new arrivals can get health checks, TB tests, and immunizations for their children, a designated person is assigned to the new family to assist with these tasks. Appointments with the local health clinic which handles refugee cases are set up. Sometimes, this designated person has to drive them back and forth to different clinics to complete all the tests required by the government. This person also drives them to needed places to complete the initial paperwork, like applying for their Social Security cards and completing Selective Service registration.

Many things are involved in caring for the needs of the Amerasians, the refugees and all those that come through the church. Above all, the church makes sure that those under its care will not feel neglected, abandoned, discriminated against, or treated differently. Many refugees who have experienced positively how these Christians treated them, with love and care, get more involved and help meet other people's needs. Many of them have also recommitted their faith in God and become stronger Christians.

Applying for Government Support and Benefits

One needs to know where the Welfare and Social Service agencies are located. One also needs to understand the process of applying and completing the paperwork for government assistance.

Amerasians and refugees are eligible for some welfare and benefits assistance from the government. These benefits will vary according to the laws of each state and federal regulations. At the Welfare and Social Service Office, they are just like other refugees applying for assistance. At the time this project was written, upon approval of their applications by San Diego County, each adult person could receive \$299 each month, up to eight months, plus food stamps and medical benefits.

After eight months, they could go to another county office to apply for General Relief which allowed them to borrow a certain amount of money, but they had to work each month to pay it back. All these activities require a lot of time filling out paperwork and going to see the social/case workers.

For Amerasians with small children of their own, the welfare benefits may last longer. However, in various counties, welfare and federal funds to support many of the cluster sites have been cut substantially which leaves the Amerasians to despairingly survive on their own with a small amount of help in a short period of time from the

government.⁹

As a sponsor, the church has explained the necessity that the Amerasians, other refugees, and their family members need to stay together to contribute to and share the cost of housing and food. If they can learn how to work together, they will have enough money to pay for rent each month and save money for other necessities such as getting an automobile license to drive and buying a used car for transportation.

It is an important reminder to all people not to buy into the false idea that "If you have money, you will have everything." Surely, money is critically needed for the first few months until everything is settled in place. But money cannot buy happiness. Money can separate people and tear families apart if it is not carefully handled. Amerasians and family members have to learn how to handle money. They must sit down and plan how much they are going to spend, how much they are going to save, and how much they are going to send back to Vietnam to help relatives. Many times, conflicts arise because money is not handled properly. Amerasians, their spouses and family members must figure out what is best for the whole family.

Sadly, many Amerasians want to make quick money and spend it right away on material things that make them look good. Many Amerasian families have a hard time emotionally

⁹ Mydans "Once Lost in Vietnam", A12.

adjusting to the new fast-paced life of America, because they bought into the false security that material things can bring. Nice cars, big stereos, new television sets have pulled people to work harder to get them. As a result of trying to work as many hours as they can when the opportunity comes, they do not have enough time for each other. Their spouses and children suffer. They need to see that family is more important than money.

Therefore, the pastors and the church's ministry team have to keep reminding people: "Stay within the budget; do not spend more than what you have. Put some in savings; and buy only what you really need." Many pastoral visits have been made to their homes to help them deal with the issue of how to handle the family's money.

In Vietnam, these refugees did not have to deal with a lot of money. A U.S. \$100 bill equates to more than \$1,000,000.00 (dong) in Vietnam currency. Husband, wife and children had worked together. In Vietnam, money matters are easier to handle than in the United States.

Therefore, through many pastoral visits, sermons, teaching lessons in Sunday School, and informal conversations, the pastors and the ministry team can help them deal with short-term and long-term adjustments. The church is there with its many services and ministry teams available to help Amerasians, refugees and family members to deal with problems and conflicts in preventive manners.

It is a long process of making adjustments for the pastors and the ministry team to build relationships, friendships and to establish trust with these Amerasians, refugees and family members. By learning to work together, we can help the Amerasians adapt to the new life in America and to thrive as they participate in the church's ministry, meeting their needs as well as the needs of other people.

There are small support groups meeting the needs of different age levels. There is plenty of room for growth, for change, for becoming mature in faith and in service to others.

The Vietnamese congregation at Wesley United Methodist Church, through its sponsorship program, through meeting people's physical, emotional, social and spiritual needs, has become the largest Vietnamese Methodist congregation in the United States with more than 600 members. It is an active, vibrant and serving congregation.

Educational Needs

One needs to encourage Amerasians to make every effort to attend adult school where ESL is taught. Right on the premises of Wesley are many rooms which are used to offer ESL training at different levels to refugees and Amerasians. These ESL classes are sponsored and funded by the government to help Amerasians, refugees and their family members to get a head start in their new beginnings in America. Many of

them just walk to school and enroll in beginning or advanced classes.

Unfortunately for many Amerasians, because of the lack of fundamental education while still in Vietnam, going back to school to learn basic English is a struggle. Not having the needed basic education makes some of them even more reluctant to register for classes. Seth Mydans sadly stated that the Amerasians are "poorly educated and often abandoned because of discrimination in Vietnam."¹⁰

Going to school brings back many bad memories for most of these Amerasians, because it used to be a place of mockery and humiliation, and of being beaten up physically by their peers. Mary Nguyen, a worker at St. Anselm's Immigrant and Refugee Center, comments on the will to learn of the Amerasians. "These young adults are good looking and smart, but too often their intellectual curiosity has died. After being turned down so often, they have learned to let life happen, with no ability to take control of their own lives. The young women are pushed into convenient marriages, while the young men often lack any concept of preparing for careers."¹¹

Some Amerasians want to find some work to earn extra money to spend. After a while, they realize that learning

¹⁰ Mydans "Once Lost in Vietnam", A12.

¹¹ See Lucy Parker, "Amerasian Ministry Faces Challenge in Launching New Lives," Episcopal News, Sept. 1992, 6.

English is a must for them in order to communicate with others, and to find better work. Coming to America not properly equipped to face life here, they carry with them no transferable job skills, which makes adapting more difficult. They need encouragement and motivation that they can make it far if they really want to. They need someone to believe that they can start learning; they can thrive and succeed, despite all that misfortune back in Vietnam.

Lack of education leads to elimination from the continually spinning wheel of life. In other words, it means, that without education, one will be left behind. Society will keep moving on, waiting for no one. The pastors and the ministry team members also encourage Amerasians and refugees alike, to get an education in many different ways. It is often said by the pastors at Wesley, "Suppose you go to school and learn ten new words today and forget eight of them;; you still know two. Keep doing that and you will get far. We can only encourage and help you register, but you have to do the studying." Some Amerasians that heed the advise to study and work hard have improved.

Job Training and Employment

Step by step, we must help the Amerasians accept their new homes. They need to have a car to help them get around. They need to learn how to find work through the newspapers, through refugee assistance agencies and through the church's services. They also need to learn how to fill out a job

application and get themselves prepared for the job interview. They have to learn to develop themselves as presentable to employers. They must learn how to conduct themselves during a job interview. The first thing that they need to learn is not to "shake hands like a dead fish." Then they need on-the-job-training experience, from a company that is willing to train them on the basis that they are hard workers who are willing to learn.

They have to do many of these things before the government assistance terminates their monthly checks. Many Amerasians, refugees, and family members, enroll in classes in basic electronic assembly to improve their English skill and also their social network. Many find menial work, first, in order to support themselves financially, then go to school later. They know that no government will feed them forever and policies can change quickly.

With the help and recommendation of the pastors and their sponsors, some companies will hire them despite their limited English skills. Many have to work at the lowest level and work their way up. Working hard and diligently will help them build up confidence and self-esteem.

Many Amerasians, refugees, and family members, with the help of the church, stay together to support one another. Many wives stay at home to care for children while the husbands work at restaurants or sewing companies. These husbands also work to clean offices, deliver newspapers, or

clean and wash cars. Sometimes, the wives help the husbands collect papers, boxes, and cans to sell at recycling centers.

By working and earning money, they soon discover that they can contribute to the society and that they are useful to the world. With the law protecting people from being discriminated against because of their color, race, gender and religious preference, with new acquired English and job skills, many have found themselves on the way to success.

They have to remind themselves that they no longer have to feel inferior by comparing themselves with their successful peers, or on a basis of having a brand new car or new clothes. They have to learn to accept the quality of life they have experienced thus far. Someday, they may have a higher paying and more stable job like their other friends. But nothing is guaranteed unless they try hard and follow their dreams.

As new arrivals trying to start another life, they need to set reachable goals. They need to see that having all the material things in life does not guarantee security and happiness. Trusting in God every step of the way can indeed, provide peace, joy and contentment.

Becoming Part of the Worshiping Community

As sponsors we have to go beyond providing just the material needs. We have to integrate Amerasians into a good community where they can feel they belong; where they can

find help to deal with emotional difficulties and spiritual needs.

As the Amerasians, refugees and their family members are integrated into the life of the Christian community in San Diego, they have a far better chance of success. The author has seen many people going back to school; many passed their driving tests and received the license to drive; some found good jobs at restaurants as cooks; some found works at hotels; some slowly picked themselves up after many failed attempts to try again. They live and raise their families well. They are living examples of how God can use caring and loving people, like you and me, to minister effectively to these people's needs and see them succeed in life.

There are many weekly prayer and Bible study groups. There is a monthly potluck meeting, a sight-seeing group and many more programs which provide good nurture and bonding for all who are involved.

For those Amerasians and family members who draw themselves close to the church, and to God, their lives are more stable because of the many strong supports they have. They have a far better chance to make it in America. When they are well grounded in God and in the church life, the pastor will usually have a better opportunity to offer continual support and care. The pastor can counsel the Amerasians and follow-up with them and their families to see

how they grow in their decision making. The pastor is often welcomed into their homes to pray with them, for their needs, and for God's power to live the abundant life.

Through welcoming them to come and worship with all others, as one big family, without any discrimination, love and trust has grown inside and blossomed. When they know and experience through worship the genuine love of God, they will reach out and invite other friends to come and worship God also.

All their lives, they had heard enough negative comments that "They will never make it in life. They are doomed because they have been abandoned!" But, when God's love fills their hearts and the transformation of their minds causes them to stop putting themselves down, Amerasians will thrive, succeed, and have a meaningful life.

Reaching Out, Empowering and Serving Others

A dangerous mentality or attitude which hinders many Amerasians and refugees in their healing and growth is the thought that everybody is owing them something; that America is responsible for their misfortune and suffering; that it is time to receive and take back that which is lost. Amerasians and other refugees should overcome this negative thought in order to be healed, to grow, and to serve.

All healing and growth take time. No one can understand Amerasians better than they, themselves. We must empower them to reach out, get involved in sharing the pains

of other people around them, and stop focusing on their own pains. They can invite their friends to church and share with them what God has done in their lives.

The healing, the forgiveness, and the changes that take place in their lives will draw their friends to experience God's love themselves. Indeed, God has shown love, forgiveness, and acceptance toward Amerasians, refugees, and family members through the love, care, and ministry of the church. With God's love, Amerasians can accept themselves and begin to reach out and serve others.

They need to see themselves, learn to listen to other people, and share with an open ear and a genuine loving heart. They must learn not to judge others by outside appearances, but to look deep within to see the beauty of the heart. They need to respect themselves before they can expect others to do the same. They now can begin to reach out and serve other Amerasians, and refugees, as they have been served. They can begin to be involved in the ministry of equipping and empowering the people to serve others with their gifts. As Letty M. Russell states:

The gifts of ministry are all part of the one calling of God, and help to maintain the "bond of peace," in a setting where there is danger of division between Jews and Gentiles.¹²

How Christians love, treat one another, and serve Amerasians and non-Amerasians alike, reflects the calling and beauty of

¹² Letty M. Russell, Growth in Partnership (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 43.

God in our lives. How Amerasians love, accept themselves, treat and serve others exemplifies God's glory, grace and power to the world.

One pastor, one caregiver, one social worker or one person will not carry this impossible task of meeting all the needs of Amerasians, refugees and family members. Together, planning and working as a team, churches in partnership with communities can serve effectively more people than we can ever imagine. God's grace will carry us through when we feel we have reached our limits. Together we can bring God's love and justice to the broken world.

CHAPTER 7

Summary, Suggestions and Conclusion

Throughout this project, one has seen the great loss of not knowing one's father, the struggle with poverty, the discrimination, the harsh mistreatment, the rejection, the pain of "han," and the suffering endured by many Amerasians and their families.

Therefore, it is suggested that Amerasians could seek out American veterans who Amerasians can relate to and feel comfortable with, or someone whom they would meet and could say, "It was like meeting my dad."¹ Or they could find someone, like Mary Sylvia Green Payne Nguyen, whom they could call "Mom."² On the other side, the Vietnamese or the Americans can reach out and adopt literally or figuratively one or many Amerasians to be their sons and daughters. Amerasians may not need our material possessions as much as they need our love and acceptance. The communities' support is strongly needed to make them feel that they belong.

The Amerasians are advised to seek professional and pastoral care and counseling to help them deal with emotional difficulties and spiritual issues. They can pray to God and seek God's help. Any Amerasian can begin a new relationship with God with a simple prayer like, "God,

¹ Padgett et al., 65.

² Mike Sager, "The Dust of Life," Rolling Stone, 14 Nov. 1991, 61.

please help me deal with the pain, the anger and suffering that I have experienced. I want to invite you, God, to come into my life and set me free from the power of sin and evil. Help me to live an effective life. In Jesus' name. Amen." Amerasians may tell God simply what is on their hearts and minds, believe that God does hear prayers, and leave the answer up to God.

Then, with God's power, the Amerasians could say to those who hurt them, "I would appreciate if you do not call me by that name, or treat me that way. I am a child of God." They can say, "I feel hurt when you say that to me" to those who are still trying to discriminate against them, in one way or the other. Amerasians cannot avoid rude, unkind and insensitive people; rather, they can be assertive and express their feelings and make the right responses.

Unless Amerasians will say, "No, that hurts me. I do not want to be treated that way any longer," others will not stop using their destructive words or deeds. If Amerasians, cannot be assertive and confront people, they must seek help from those who love and support them and who are willing to speak out for them in constructive ways.

This project has shown that many Amerasians have been neglected, for a long time, without any emotional care and spiritual support from the community at large. As a group of people of misfortune, they do not get far in life because many good things and opportunities have been kept secret,

hidden from them. They did not have the needed education entitled to all persons. They did not have the happiness of having their physical and material needs met. Socially and emotionally they have been abandoned, rejected and hated.

Therefore, it is suggested that Amerasians seek out good people and become their good friends through love, acceptance, trust and respect. There are good Bible-teaching churches and youth groups that support them socially, emotionally and spiritually. Amerasians should not single themselves out from the group or let the group single them out, but participate fully in the life of the church or the activities of the youth group. Good things will come out of those group meetings, such as new friendship, new acceptance, new bonding, new love and hope.

Amerasians will need to build good relationships and friendships with other Vietnamese people as others also reach out to be their friends. They should seek out friends who are willing to help them with the English language and job searching. As caring people, you and I can "teach a little English," just like Katie Kelly did for the Amerasians in Vietnam.³ Kelly quit her job as a TV reviewer, went to Vietnam, passed through all the "red tape, language barriers and even bats to aid impoverished

³ Katie Kelly, "The Christmas That Changed My Life," McCall's, Dec. 1990, 66.

Amerasian youngsters in Vietnam."⁴ Kelly taught English to Amerasians with whatever means she could find. Many Amerasian lives have been touched by caring people like Kelly, Mary P. Nguyen, you and I, who have the hearts for the unfortunate Amerasians.

The Amerasians should also continue to learn the Vietnamese language, and study the culture and the Vietnamese people as much as they can. By understanding the language, the culture, the people, and the history, Amerasians can begin to understand some of the roots of the problems regarding their suffering and deal with it more constructively. They should be assertive rather than reactive.

Spiritually, not many know and have the experience of the God who loves, cares and accepts them as they are. They do not know that their pains can be healed by the power of God. They do not know that they can be forgiven and given a new status of being God's children through Jesus Christ. They do not know of God's power, of the help of the church and the care of people who will assist them to succeed and build effective lives. They do not know that with God's grace, they can begin to love, accept themselves, and forgive others. They do not know that all human beings are created to worship God, to love and serve one another.

⁴ Katie Kelly, "Critic's Choice," People Weekly, Fall 1991, 34-37.

But, now they can come to know that these gifts of healing and power for productive living are available to them! They can claim God's gift of life offered through Jesus Christ. They can find a church and attend worship services and check things out, see how they would fit in and benefit from becoming involved. They can buy or find a Bible and read it and understand the Good News that God has been communicating to them and to all humankind. They can talk to pastors or other mature Christians who can help them understand God's Word. You and I can assist them to come to know the love of God. We can share our love and service to them, so that their lives may become meaningful and satisfying. With God's help they can become better persons who build effective and fruitful lives.

This project has demonstrated the important role of pastoral care in the life of these newcomers. They are a special group of people who need extra special care. It is a great and challenging ministry for those who are involved in caring for the Amerasians. It will not always be an easy task. It requires a lot of care, attention, patience and love, which sometimes, can be time consuming, energy draining, and emotionally frustrating. However, it will be rewarding to see them starting to move on with life, as the pain of the past begins to heal, through the genuine and intentional caring of loving members of society. Therefore, it is suggested that Amerasians will seek out pastoral care

from caring pastors/counselors. They must know that there is help available out there to assist them in making good adjustments.

This project has sought to continue to affirm the uniqueness of our relationships with God, through Jesus Christ. It has shown God's healing power in the life of the Amerasians as they come to experience God personally. It has challenged readers to break the prejudices, the silence, of not getting involved in making life a better place at whatever cost for the Amerasians. Therefore, as a body of Christ, we must seek to meet the Amerasians' physical, emotional and spiritual needs as well as to provide them with a better place for their social and intellectual needs.

The project has shown practically many of the Amerasians' needs. They need a lot of support from the Vietnamese and the American people and the community at large, in order to make it in America.

This project has called forth all people to strive to eliminate all negative prejudices and biases against the Amerasians and other people. As created beings, we must learn to live in harmony with each other in respectful manners that will help make living an experience of God's abundant grace.

Ten years or twenty years from now, those of us who do not have Amerasian children in our families will probably have them in our midst. These children will call us

grandmother or grandfather. So we must learn now to treat these people as we would want others to treat our children and grandchildren. Sincerely, we must learn to treat them as human beings with dignity and all the rights entitled to them. We must love them as God's children. We must accept them the way they are without trying to impose our ways on them and trying to change them. We must show them that the way of salvation and liberation can be found in God, the Source of life, hope and power.

Jean Carlin, a psychiatrist, states the "here and now challenge" before us with some hope. "I think there is hope, if we help them now. We should not just let these people go down the tubes and then support them in prison later on."⁵

Mary Payne Nguyen, the coordinator at St. Anselm Amerasian Center in Garden Grove, California, has advocated for a "comprehensive, three-year program in which Amerasians would receive funds while they receive education and job training here."⁶ Any one may contact the St. Anselm Amerasian Center to find out more information about the programs and services which they offer.

As a pastor, the author calls forth churches and communities to continue to advocate, to integrate the Amerasians into church life and to find out their needs and

⁵ See Klein, A12.

⁶ See Mott, E9.

develop suitable programs to meet those needs.

As a special group of people, they need a lot of love and acceptance as members of the large Vietnamese community. They need someone who will trust and respect them for who they are. They need someone who believes that they too can be good citizens, who are trying their very best to contribute to the better living of all people.

They need to understand that while trying hard to adjust to a new life and to a new culture in America, they must continue to improve in areas of education and language skills. Given enough time, they and their children will become useful and effective citizens of society. We must be patient and gentle with them.

To Vietnamese church leaders, this project has sought to pass on the positive attitudes of rebuilding society with the Amerasians, here and now, in the United States and in Vietnam in the future. We must begin now, before it is too late.

We must include them as an important part in providing a solid foundation of hope and love now and in the future. We cannot fail these Amerasians' hopes and dreams. We must fight together many battles to help the Amerasians succeed in making adjustments, adapt to a new life and thrive beyond any limits in this country to reach their potentials.

This project intentionally omitted an outline of detailed programs because at each local setting, needs and

resources may be varied. It also did not show how a local setting can apply for government funds or outside help in order to meet the physical and material needs of Amerasians. One can contact local offices to find out more information regarding federal programs for Amerasians. The author has not dealt with the ministry for Amerasians who are in state prisons or county jails.

Areas where more research can be done include finding out effective ways to reach reluctant Amerasians and refugees and providing them with professional counseling services. A possible area to deal with in the future is finding more successful stories of Amerasians who have made good adjustments and have built effective lives. The newspapers and the media need to find good, positive, successful and encouraging stories to share with the communities.

Wesley's model of practical ministry can be modified and adapted to apply in each local church or community setting. Wesley's limitation is still in the area of finding more financial and material resources to meet the demanding needs of all newcomers.

An emerging need of Amerasians and their children, as they move beyond being new immigrants, is the need to preserve their roots, knowing who they are while advancing in school to become engineers, doctors, nurses, police officers, lawyers, teachers, community leaders, pastors, and

caregivers. They need the support of the community to help them achieve their dreams and goals.

In conclusion, the author uses a Scripture verse taken from John 16:33, in which Jesus said, "I have said this to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world."⁷ This verse has been used to emphasize strongly that we might have a long way to go in our process of bringing healing, forgiveness and wholeness to the Amerasians and to the broken world, but God's answer is found in Jesus Christ. Robert Hayes said, "We do not know what tomorrow will hold, but we know Who holds tomorrow."⁸ Healing and justice will not come easily for the Amerasians, unless they themselves participate as an active voice to stop the discrimination, the prejudices and the suffering. Healing, justice, and freedom are our choices to make today.

With God's help we can open our eyes and see a need, open our ears and hear a desperate cry for help, open our hearts and feel the pain. Then, with God's strength, we can open our minds and find the will to do what is necessary to love, to care and to serve.

God is with us to give us the courage, the strength and the power needed to fulfill God's calls in our lives.

⁷ Metzger and Murphy, 152.

⁸ Robert E. Hayes Jr., "Mountain Top Experience," sermon delivered at the Canterbury United Methodist Church, Houston, Texas, 18 Feb. 1996.

Suffering will always remain as part of life. But God's grace is available as we learn to deal with it. There will be many roadblocks, barriers to overcome and persecution to face, but with strong hope, confidence and complete trust in God, we can strive together with Amerasians to help bring healing, love, justice and wholeness to all people.

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